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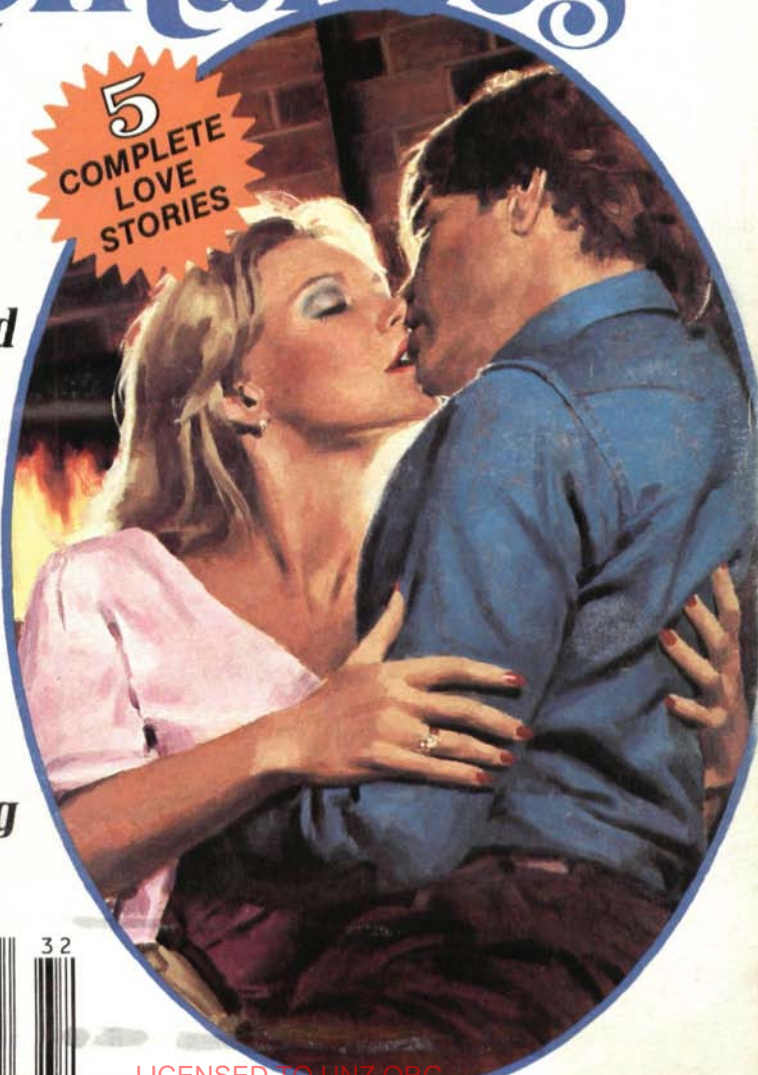
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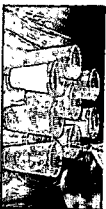
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OCT/NOV/DEC 1988 • VOLUME 2 NO. 32

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Prince Charming Replies

Nothing surprises Katie Stewart more than her "Personals" ad getting an overwhelming response—and her handsome boss, sexy Ross Chandler, objecting. Claiming concern for her safety, Ross insists on screening her prospects and spying on her dates. Then he decides that if Katie wants Prince Charming, he'll be irresistible and sweep her off her feet!

SHERRYL WOODS

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“Come on, Katie, try it! What have you got to lose?”

Stunned, Katie Stewart stared at her best friend, Jennifer Gleason, as if she'd suddenly done a personality switch as dramatic as Dr. Jekyll's and Mr. Hyde's. She shook her head adamantly. "Fifteen years ago, I could have done it." She hesitated, "Maybe. Now, it's absurd. I'm a mother. I have a responsibility to demonstrate good judgment. I'm thirty-four years old."

"All the more reason to do it," chimed

in Maggie Kincaid. "You're not getting any younger. You don't want to be alone forever. If we were single, you can bet Jennifer and I would do it."

"Here," Jennifer urged. "Have some more champagne. Just imagine the possibilities."

"If I have any more champagne, I'll have nightmares about the possibilities." Katie eyed her friends warily. "Are you two trying to get me drunk so I won't be able to think clearly?"

Jennifer and Maggie exchanged slightly guilty glances, then admitted practically in unison, "Well, it would be a whole lot better if you stopped thinking and worrying and just *did* it."

Katie took a long, slow gulp of the outrageously expensive, delightfully bubbly imported champagne her two friends had brought over to help her get through the first anniversary of her divorce. They'd been afraid she'd be depressed. Actually, she'd never felt better in her life. For the first time ever, she felt she was in control of her own destiny—or she had until Jennifer and Maggie had started plying her with champagne.

The year following the breakup of her marriage had not been a picnic by any means, but she'd managed. She'd been too frantically busy to indulge in self-pitying binges. With grim determination, she had marched out just a few weeks after the divorce and gotten herself a surprisingly responsible job for a woman with such limited practical skills. She'd also learned to fix the garbage disposal, mow the lawn, change the spark plugs in the car, and still kept her ten-year-old daughter, Lisa, in reasonably neat clothes and on time for school.

As she saw it, tonight was not an occasion for depression but cause for celebration. She'd survived having Paul Stewart, the only man with whom she'd ever been involved, walk out on her after twelve years of marriage, and she was damn proud of the things she'd accomplished. That did not mean, however, that she was ready for a new relationship, which was exactly what Jennifer and Maggie were prodding her to go for.

"Even if I were ready to start dating—and I'm not saying that I am—I'm not about to place an ad in the newspaper. Finding a man is not like advertising for a used piano, for heaven's sake. You can't buy romance with four lines of type in the

classifieds. These things are supposed to happen naturally."

"Have you met a single man this entire last year that you wanted to go out with?" Jennifer demanded.

"Well, no," Katie admitted. An image of her boss flitted through her mind, warmed her blood, and then just as quickly vanished, "Not exactly."

"There," Jennifer said triumphantly. "Then you have to try this. Put an ad in the personals column. We've been studying them for the last few weeks. Some of them are a lot of fun. Perfectly respectable people put in ads. Lawyers, doctors, professors. Really, what could happen with some stodgy old professor?"

"Why don't we compromise? Maybe I could just answer an ad."

"No. Bad idea," Maggie said. "You want to be in charge here."

"I'll think about it," she finally conceded with a tiny sigh.

"No," Jennifer said firmly, in the same no-nonsense way she talked to her kids, one of whom happened to be Lisa's very best friend. "Don't think about it. Let's write your ad right now and mail it in before you can change your mind. Where's your notepaper?"

Katie had learned a certain amount of independence in the last year, but she'd never been able to withstand the whirlwind effects of Hurricane Jennifer once she'd gotten an idea into her head. Jennifer would find the paper, if she had to turn the house upside down. It was easier just to tell her. "In the desk."

Five minutes later, the three of them were sitting at the dining room table composing an ad to lure the man of Katie's dreams out of hiding and into her arms.

Half an hour after that they all sat back with a sigh.

"How does this sound?" Jennifer asked. "Feisty, independent redhead with varied interests seeks sincere, intelligent man,

thirty-five to forty-five, with zany sense of humor and adventurous spirit to sweep her off her feet. Only Prince Charming need reply."

"Why thirty-five to forty-five?" Maggie asked. "What's wrong with a younger man?"

"I don't want to raise another child," Katie said. "I already have Lisa."

"So the ad stands," Jennifer said. Katie could tell from the satisfaction in her voice that it was a statement, not a question, so she didn't even bother to argue. She just watched as Jennifer addressed an envelope to the newspaper, then tucked it into her purse.

"Give it to me!" Katie demanded, reaching for it. "I'll mail it in the morning, if I haven't come to my senses by then."

Jennifer stood and put her purse behind her back. "I'll mail it tonight, just to save you from yourself. Come on, Maggie. Let's go, before she tries to hold me down and steal the letter back from me."

"Please, you two. Can't we wait until morning? I'm having second thoughts already."

"You never stopped having second thoughts," Jennifer noted, kissing her on the cheek. "Night, sweetie. Pleasant dreams."

Maggie gave her a hug. "I can hardly wait until the first batch of mail rolls in. You're going to have the time of your life."

"I'm going to have my head examined," Katie muttered, as she watched the two of them walk away with her future tucked in Jennifer's purse. There was just the slightest slur to her words and a spinning in her head.

"First thing in the morning," she amended.

Dear Box 7982,

I would have sent roses, but I was afraid they'd wilt before you got them.

It's hard to be Prince Charming when you're dealing with a box number. Maybe we could meet and you could see for yourself. I'm tall, dark, and handsome, just like the fairy tales require. I'm also a divorced father of two, thirty-eight, with no incredibly bad habits, despite what my ex-wife might want to tell you. Give me a call at the number below and we can see what else we have in common.

—Jason

Katie sat at her desk holding the letter in one hand and a mug of steaming black coffee in the other.

Jason. Nice name. She'd never known anyone named Jason before. And he sounded like he might be a lot of fun. She looked at the phone number, then at the batch of unopened mail still scattered across the top of the desk, and shook her head in amazement.

She'd never expected this many responses, especially right away. These men must have written the minute they read the paper. She'd had no idea there were so many people looking for companionship and using the personals to find it.

She nibbled nervously at her full lower lip and reached for another letter.

"What's up, Katie?"

Ross Chandler stood in the doorway of Katie's office and watched the play of expressions on her lovely, fragile face. Those wonderful deep blue eyes gazed up at him in surprise, and a flush of embarrassment tinted her cheeks pink. She looked exactly like a china doll, but he knew there was hidden strength in Katie, a determination that had made her overcome her initial sense of inadequacy following her divorce and had turned her into one of the best executive assistants he'd ever had at Chandler Electronics.

"Don't tell me," he said with an exaggerated moan. "You've been mailing out your resume all over town, and these are just the first responses."

He was joking, but the possibility that she might actually leave seemed to slow his heartbeat to a halt. He waited expectantly, hoping for one of her bright smiles. She smiled, but it was very wobbly and weak. She looked like a schoolgirl caught cheating on an exam.

"Not exactly."

"What then?"

"It's personal, Ross."

Troubled by her uncharacteristic hesitancy, he walked over, sat on the edge of her desk, and gazed intently into her eyes. She blinked and looked away, then began nervously biting her lower lip again.

"So personal that you can't tell me about it? I thought we were friends. I thought we could discuss anything. If you're having problems . . ."

"We are friends, but this is . . . it's not a problem, exactly. Oh, what the hell . . . they're answers to an ad."

He breathed a sigh of relief. So, it wasn't a crisis after all. "What kind of ad? Are you trying to sell something?"

"In a way."

"What?"

Katie found she was unable to meet his interested gaze. "Myself," she mumbled. "What on earth . . . ?"

"You know, one of those things in the personals column that runs in *The Week-*ly."

"My God, you're not kidding."

"No, I'm not kidding, and what's wrong with it?" she demanded defiantly, wondering why she was suddenly defending something that she'd fought so hard against in the first place. "A lot of people are doing it."

Of course, she reminded herself, Ross Chandler was not one of them. He had probably never had to advertise for a date in his life. In fact, he probably rarely had to ask for one. Katie had seen the seemingly endless parade of gorgeous, wil-
lowy, aggressive women who streamed in

and out of his office. Those were not the meetings he invited her to attend, which meant they were entirely personal. Every one of those women probably received long-stemmed roses at least once a week and shared a gourmet meal with him at one of the best restaurants in town, while she was sitting at home with Lisa eating spaghetti with sauce from a jar.

It probably wouldn't do at all to imagine what else those women got from Ross Chandler. He was a very virile-looking man, the sort of man who conjured up visions of a muscular body scantily wrapped in a towel and glistening wet from the shower even when he was wearing a perfectly respectable three-piece suit. Just thinking about it made goose bumps rise all over her.

Right now he was holding out his hand, a strong, very masculine hand flecked with dark hairs. "Let me see."

"No way. I am perfectly capable of making my own choice."

"When was the last time you went on a date?" he challenged her.

Katie refused to meet his penetrating gaze. She hated it when those dark, knowing eyes of his bored into her. It was as if he could see into her very soul. That look invariably turned her insides to mush.

"I thought so," he said triumphantly. "You haven't been on a date with a new man since you met your husband back in college, right?"

"High school," she muttered.

"My God. It's worse than I thought. Do you have any idea what men are like out there today? They're unscrupulous vultures who'll take advantage of an innocent like you."

"I was married for twelve years. That hardly qualifies me as an innocent. You don't seem to have very much faith in me."

What he had, Ross decided with a sudden pang, was actually a very bad case of

jealousy. It startled the living daylights out of him.

"I do have faith in you, but I still think you should let me see those letters."

"Why?"

Why, indeed? "Because I'm a good judge of character."

Katie's eyes remained sharply skeptical, but she finally reached into her briefcase and handed him the letter signed Jason.

Ross skimmed the note. Damn! The man did have a certain flair. "Are you going to call him?" he demanded.

"I was thinking about it."

"Do it now."

"Why now?" Katie asked.

"If you're going to do it, you may as well do it now."

She sighed, and the hesitant look in her eyes almost did him in. Why on earth was he pushing her to do this?

"Use the speaker phone," he said insistently.

"Why?"

"So I can listen, of course."

"Are you some kind of strange pervert who likes to snoop on other people's private phone conversations?" she taunted lightly, and Ross wondered what she'd say if she knew the truth. He was terrified that she was going to get herself in over her head with someone more dangerous than a weirdo who listened to phone calls.

"Humor me."

Katie finally shrugged in acquiescence. She heard Ross's sigh of relief as she poked the button for the speaker phone, then dialed the number on Jason's letter. When a secretary answered, Katie gulped and then said, "Is Jason in, please? This is Katie Stewart."

"May I tell him what it's regarding?"

Katie's eyes widened. She hadn't expected this. What on earth was she supposed to say—that the man had responded to her ad? It might embarrass him, to say

nothing of making her feel like a jerk.

"Actually, it's rather personal," she said at last.

"Oh, he's answered another one of those ads, has he? Just a minute, Ms. Stewart."

Katie could still hear the secretary's good-humored laughter as she was put on hold. A few seconds later, a pleasant, deep voice rumbled in her ear.

"So, you're looking for Prince Charming?" he said with amusement. "If you'd asked for him, I'm sure Dora would have put you straight through without giving you such a hard time."

"So, Prince Charming, tell me more about yourself," she said in the dignified, reserved voice she generally used with Ross's business associates.

"Why don't we discuss everything you wanted to know about me over lunch?" he suggested. "Then we can talk all about you over dinner."

Smooth, Katie thought. The man was very smooth.

"Let's just start with lunch," she said, noting that Ross was staring out the window with a fierce scowl on his face. She wondered briefly what that was all about, but Jason was suggesting that he pick her up at noon.

"You mean today?" she asked in a horrified whisper.

"Why not? Do you already have plans?"

She had a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and an apple in her briefcase—did that count? Probably not. She sighed. "Today would be fine."

"Terrific. I'll pick you up at noon. Just tell me where you are."

Suddenly, Ross was shaking his head and practically jumping up and down to get her attention.

"Excuse me," she murmured into the phone. "Someone just stepped into my office." She flipped off the speaker and put

her hand over the receiver. "What on earth is wrong with you?"

"You're not getting into a car with a total stranger," he said adamantly.

She blinked at his harsh tone, started to rebel, and then realized he was absolutely right. She nodded, and started to talk directly into the phone, but Ross was beside her in an instant, turning the speaker back on.

"I'll meet you," she told Jason. "Just pick the place, and I'll be there."

He named a lovely seafood restaurant overlooking the water. "Is that convenient?"

Actually, it was clear across town, but she loved the place. Ross had taken her there to celebrate a business deal a few weeks earlier.

"That will be just fine. See you at noon," she told Jason.

As soon as she hung up, Ross gave her a list of instructions longer than any he'd ever given her to prepare her for a major business meeting. Go straight into the restaurant. Don't linger in the parking lot. Sit at a table in full view of the other patrons. If the man does anything out of line, excuse yourself and go into the rest room. Her head was reeling.

"And exactly how long am I supposed to hide out in the rest room?" she demanded.

"Until he leaves."

"What if he waits? Criminals often go to uncommon lengths to wait out their quarry," she observed tartly.

Ross scowled at her sarcasm.

"Just be careful," he muttered as he walked out of the office, the door slamming behind him. Katie stared at the door in surprise, then shrugged. It must have been an accident. Ross Chandler was always in control.

He was also sitting behind a bank of ferns at the seafood restaurant, she discovered when she stopped in the rest room

just before asking the maitre d' if Jason was there yet. With his face only partially hidden by a newspaper, Ross looked like a furtive private eye. Katie debated killing him on the spot, but finally marched right past him with her head held high. Committing murder on their first date probably would not make a good impression on Jason.

Apparently, though, she didn't quite rid herself of the scowl on her face, because after Jason arrived at their reserved table and they had introduced themselves, the first thing he said was, "Are you okay?"

"Absolutely. I just saw someone I know," she said. "It's nothing."

Jason demonstrated astonishing concern. "Would you prefer to leave? We could always go somewhere else."

"No. Of course not. Why would I want to leave?"

"You seem to be upset."

Katie gave him one of her most dazzling smiles. "I'm sorry. I'm not upset, just surprised. I hadn't expected to see him again so soon. It's just my boss."

"Oh," Jason said, his tone relieved.

She was going to show Ross. She was going to have the time of her life. She propped her chin in her hand and gazed intently at Jason. He was tall, dark, and handsome, just as his letter had said. But not quite as tall as Ross, she noted. Nor did his dark hair have the same ebony sheen as Ross's.

Good Lord, was she going to start comparing every man she met with her boss? How absurd!

She tried focusing on Jason's obvious strengths. His manner from the moment he'd joined her had been charming, and his sense of humor was just as lively as his note had hinted. He also seemed perceptive and sincere. He did not appear to be a threat.

In fact, she decided midway through her lunch of poached salmon with dill

sauce, if she weren't vibrantly—no, disgustingly—aware of Ross sitting just beyond the line of her vision, she would be having a very good time.

Jason told her about his children, and it was obvious that he was devoted to the boys. The breakup of his marriage had been "just one of those things," he said without a trace of bitterness or floundering for excuses.

From their personal backgrounds, she and Jason drifted into a discussion of their interests. They had very little in common. He liked sailing; she got seasick. She loved to read, absorbing the information in newspapers and magazines like a sponge and treating each book as an adventure with new friends; he glanced at the sports pages and subscribed to Sports Illustrated. As they realized how unsuited they were, they laughed.

"Surely there's something we both like," Jason said. "I want to see you again."

"Salmon," Katie noted, holding up a forkful of the flaky fish.

"I'm not sure we can build a relationship around salmon."

Suddenly, the fern quivered, and Katie shot a disbelieving glance in its direction.

"I'm not sure I want to build a relationship at all," she confessed slowly. "I don't just mean with you. I mean with anyone."

Jason studied her curiously. "Then why the ad?"

She told him the story, and was pleased to see that he seemed to be laughing with her rather than at her. "So your friends set out to turn your dull, boring life around for you?"

"Exactly," she said, noting the brim of a hat poking through the fern. She was tempted to reach over and yank it off. Instead, she kept on talking. "But I don't think my life is dull and boring. I've been having a wonderful time learning to manage on my own. I love my work. I'm real-

ly getting to know my daughter. I can order pizza for dinner, if I want to, or go to a Saturday-afternoon movie, instead of cleaning the kitchen."

"I knew it," Jason said gleefully.

"What?"

"Movies. I knew we'd find something, if we talked long enough. We could go to a movie together. There's a great new science-fiction film playing."

Katie winced. "I like foreign films."

He sighed. "I should have known."

"We could still have dinner or something," she suggested bravely. "I mean, I would like to see you again." She was surprised to find that she meant it. She had enjoyed his company, even if there weren't any fireworks exploding inside. Jason was pleasant and comfortable. She'd like to have him as a friend.

"As a friend," he said, picking up on her thoughts.

She winced. "Would that be so awful?"

He grinned at her. "Actually, it would be a refreshing change." He took her hand in his as they stood and walked to the door of the restaurant. "I'll call you, Katie Stewart."

"I hope so," she said and watched him walk away, shading her eyes against the glare of the sun.

It was probably the glare of the sun that kept her from seeing Ross until she practically bumped into him. He was pacing up and down beside her car.

"What the hell did you think you were doing following me here?"

"I was worried about you," he admitted. "You could have gotten in trouble."

"I could have gotten out of it, as well. We were in a public place in broad daylight."

"Okay. You're right. I'm sorry," he said contritely. "How'd it go?"

"It went just fine. He was a perfect gentleman. Very thoughtful. Considerate. Entertaining."

Ross felt a hard knot forming in his stomach. The blasted man sounded like a paragon of virtue, and he'd looked like a damn model. He, on the other hand, had apparently made a complete jackass of himself.

"I suppose you're going to see him again," he said tightly, fully aware that he'd probably driven her to doing it just to spite him.

"Yes," she said, opening the door of her car and slipping inside.

"When?"

She smiled at him brightly. "See you back at the office" she said casually.

My name is Warren. I'm 37 years old, 6'1", and weigh about 180 as long as I don't skip going to the gym. I'm an accountant. I like the outdoors, camping, water sports, and that sort of thing. I would also like to get married, but I guess I just haven't met the right person yet. Could you be that person? Hope you'll call, so we can find out.

"I like this one," Jennifer said a week later, as she sat in the middle of Katie's living room floor sorting through the stack of responses to the ad. "He sounds sincere."

Katie took the letter Jennifer held out, read it, and shook her head. "No way."

"Why not?"

"He wants to get married."

"So what? You don't think he'll expect to do it on the first date, do you?"

Katie scowled at her. "I suppose not."

"Then call him. He likes the outdoors. You like the outdoors. That's certainly better than some of these," she said, gesturing toward a stack of rejects, including two Xeroxed form letters that had simply had her box number written in.

"Jennifer, this isn't working," Katie protested with a little sigh.

"You can't give up after one date! There may be a prince in here."

"And you think this Warren is the one?"

"Maybe. Maybe not, but I think he has definite possibilities."

"Give me the letter," Katie said with a sigh. She might as well get it over with. Jennifer was not likely to leave until she'd made at least one phone call. Hopefully, she wouldn't hold out for an engagement.

After talking to Warren for nearly an hour, with Jennifer blatantly eavesdropping and nodding enthusiastically at Katie's end of the conversation, they made a date for the weekend to go canoeing. It was not what she would have chosen for a first date. A sea-green complexion didn't do her any favors.

Warren had been adamant, though. He seemed to have an unyielding stubborn streak that did not bode well for the future of the relationship. Katie would have backed out entirely, but with Jennifer waiting hopefully, she didn't dare. Jennifer would only have insisted that she make another call. Besides, how awful could one date be? Maybe he was just having a bad night.

"I expect you to call me the minute you get home on Saturday," Jennifer said as she left. "I just have the feeling this date will be the start of something."

Saturday, however, did not exactly start out in the laugh-a-minute category Jennifer'd had in mind. The morning dawned through a typical autumn fog, layers of gray mist that shadowed Seattle's natural beauty and left it cold and damp. The fog was just beginning to lift by eleven, when Warren was due. By eleven-thirty, when pale fingers of sunlight were dappling the lawn, Katie was muttering about inconsiderate men and pacing around the house.

She glanced at her watch as she opened the door. Warren was forty-five minutes late. Instead of apologizing, he came in complaining about her directions. Since she prided herself on being precise with such things, shunning the image of a

flighty female who couldn't even get the simplest route to her own house right, she found herself immediately on the defensive. By the time they drove across town to Green Lake, Warren's mood had settled into something slightly more reasonable, but Katie's was rapidly deteriorating. Her instincts about his uncompromising demeanor on the phone were being borne out. It promised to be a very long day.

Then, to top it off, just as they were putting Warren's canoe in the water, Ross magically appeared carrying a strangely familiar-looking canoe. Since he had never once in the last ten months mentioned that he enjoyed canoeing, it couldn't have been a coincidence, though how the devil he'd found out about this date was beyond her. As for the canoe, well, she was probably mistaken. All canoes looked pretty much alike.

At the sight of Ross, dark and masculine and sexy in his shorts and form-fitting knit shirt, Katie's heart leaped into her throat, her pulse raced, and her blood heated up by several degrees. Then she recovered from his assault on her senses and vowed to kill him.

"Excuse me," she muttered to Warren, and stalked over to where Ross was struggling with what she was now convinced was a canoe he'd never before laid eyes on.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed furiously.

Ross gazed at her tolerantly, amusement glimmering in his eyes. "Isn't that obvious?" he said, gesturing toward the canoe. "What about you?"

"What's obvious is that you followed me again."

"Why would I do that?"

"Why, indeed? I just want you to know that I don't like it. On Monday morning, we are going to have a little talk about your interference in my life."

"We could talk now," he suggested, a

hopeful gleam replacing the amusement in his eyes. "We could go for a walk. The air's crisp. The sun's just coming out. The leaves are turning all these gorgeous fall colors. I even think I hear some music from the other side of the lake. A walk would be great."

"I have a date, thank you."

Ross shrugged. "Whatever you say." He glanced across at Warren. "The guy looks mad." His voice softened. "Be careful, Katie."

"Monday," she huffed, and stomped back to join Warren, who had been watching the exchange with interest. He did, indeed, look mad. In fact, his expression was fierce, reflecting a jealousy he had no right to feel. What had she gotten herself into? She could have had a nice, pleasant afternoon sitting in some movie, a French farce maybe, laughing her head off and munching on a huge tub of buttered popcorn. Instead, here she was playing tug-of-war with two ridiculously possessive men who seemed to think of her as the rope.

"Who the hell was that?" Warren grumbled. "You have some bodyguard trailing you around?"

"Something like that," Katie said.

"I'm not much on competition. Like I said in my note, I want to get married. If that guy's got first claim on you, I'll bow out now. I haven't got time to waste on a lost cause."

"Charming," Katie muttered under her breath. Aloud, she insisted, "He has no claim whatsoever on me."

Despite her statement that Ross meant nothing to her, she couldn't seem to keep her gaze from straying over to catch a quick glimpse of him as he paddled awkwardly around the lake, the muted sunlight glistening on his hair, the muscles in his arms tightening impressively as he pulled his paddle through the water.

If only she understood why he was fol-

lowing her like this. Then again, maybe she understood only too well. Ross was a kind man. He wouldn't want to stand by and watch her get hurt. Unfortunately, he was getting too close, sneaking past her defenses. She was beginning to feel something more, and she knew it would be a dreadful mistake to let him assume too large a role in her life. It was one thing to daydream about the man occasionally, but it was another entirely to start having false expectations just because he seemed to have developed an untimely and unexpected big-brother complex. Protectiveness did not necessarily translate into romantic interest.

Cramped from sitting so long in one position, and distracted by her troublesome thoughts, she shifted clumsily and foolishly. The canoe tipped wildly, just as Warren uttered an expletive that turned her complexion pink. She was about to tell him she didn't approve, but before she could open her mouth, the canoe flipped entirely, icy cold water rushed around her, and she found herself trying to kick her way back to the lake's surface.

An arm grabbed her around the waist and held her securely. She relaxed into the embrace and felt a comforting warmth steal through her. What a lovely feeling!

"Are you okay?" Ross's voice was thick with concern.

She shivered again, and this time the reaction had nothing to do with the temperature of the water. "Ross?" Her tone was puzzled. How had he gotten to her so quickly?

"It's me, Katie. Are you okay?"

"Katie!" Warren's voice, edged with angry tension, split the air. "Where the hell are you?"

"Over here," she managed before Ross clamped a hand over the mouth.

"Shut up, Katie. You are not going anywhere with that man."

She sputtered furiously, then realized

that the sensation of her lips against his palm was doing wicked things to her insides.

"This lady came as my date," Warren said, spoiling the moment. "She'll leave with me."

"Afraid not, pal. If your handling of that canoe is any indication, she'll be risking her life spending another minute with you."

"She's the one who tipped the damn thing over," Warren said, which Katie considered rather unchivalrous of him, even if it was true.

"She probably did it trying to get away from you. What did you do to her?"

Warren loomed closer, and Katie could feel Ross's muscles bunch with tension.

"Ross!" Katie said, yanking his hand away from her face. It drifted down to land somewhere in the vicinity of her right breast.

Unfortunately, Ross seemed to be oblivious to the location of his hand or the melting sensation it aroused. Rather than taking advantage of it, he glowered at Warren, muttered under his breath, shifted his hold on her, and lugged her toward shore in an effort that was ungainly, if gallant. Deprived of the sweet, aching torment of his touch on her breast, Katie found her irritation mounting, fueled by an unfamiliar sense of frustration. His arrogance in assuming that she'd needed rescuing in the first place suddenly infuriated her all over again. She'd had her fill of being smothered in her marriage to Paul.

"Ross! Put me down this instant!"

He complied, and she landed on the grass with a soft thud. He stood there scowling alternately at her and at Warren, who was towing his canoe toward shore. Ross's canoe was being towed in by another boater.

"I'll drive you home," Warren offered, standing before her in soaked clothes, his

brown hair matted to his head. He looked considerably less debonair than he had when he'd arrived on her doorstep, but no less disgruntled.

"Thanks, Warren," Katie said, only to have Ross glare at her ferociously.

"You are not leaving with him," he said with an ominous edge to his voice.

"Look," Warren interrupted. "I'm not about to get into the middle of some lovers' spat. I told you before, Katie, I'm looking for someone ready to make a commitment. You've already made one."

"I have not," she countered indignantlly. She cast a quick, covert glance in Ross's direction and felt an all-too-familiar tingle of excitement. What a fib! She had made some sort of odd emotional commitment, and she knew it. She was as involved with Ross as if they'd declared their intentions months ago.

"Let's go home," Ross said. She wasn't sure if he'd been reading her mind or was simply reacting to Warren's departure. Going home was one answer—as long as Ross didn't expect to come in with her.

"Fine. Terrific. Take me home." She stared at Ross with fire in her eyes. "But so help me, Ross Chandler, if you ever come along on another one of my dates, I'm going to have you arrested for harassment."

On the drive to Katie's house, Ross tried to bring his temper back under control. When he'd seen that canoe tip over, he wanted to kill that guy. Katie hadn't been likely to drown, that was true enough. But she could have been hurt, and the thought of her being injured had made him go all queasy and cold inside. If he had a grain of sense in his head, he'd drop her at her front door and steer clear of her until Monday, when they could have a perfectly civilized discussion about all of this—maybe even a laugh.

Instead, the minute he pulled into the driveway, he found himself cutting off the

engine, getting out of the car, and following the trail of water Katie was leaving on the sidewalk. Furious as she was, he was surprised there wasn't steam rising all around her.

Lisa, her hair only a shade lighter than Katie's and her eyes just as big and blue and bright, stood in the doorway and watched their approach. She grinned, then wisely tried to smother it.

"Mom, what happened to you? And Mr. Chandler? Did you two fall in?"

"Good guess," Katie mumbled, wondering how Lisa knew Ross's name. "Get me a towel, would you, Lisa? I don't want to drip on the floor."

"Mr. Chandler, too?"

"I suppose."

Hearing the grudging tone, Lisa shot her mother a quizzical look. Katie grimaced. "Oh, of course. Get Mr. Chandler a towel, too."

The minute Lisa had vanished up the stairs, Katie whirled on Ross. "How did my daughter know who you are?"

Uh-oh. He fumbled for a logical explanation. "She must have seen me at the office or something."

"Lisa hasn't been to the office."

"Oh."

"Oh is right. Explain."

"Well, actually, I stopped by earlier."

Katie stared at him, and all of the missing pieces of the day's puzzle clattered down around her. With a little rearrangement, they fell into place. "And I suppose she just happened to mention that I had gone to Green Lake?"

"I was looking for you. I thought maybe we could do something. What was she supposed to do? Lie?"

"Of course not. Where did you find a canoe so quickly?"

"It's yours."

"Mine!" Katie's voice escalated. "Ross Chandler, you are the most conniving, infuriating, outrageous man I have ever

known. When are you going to stop chasing me around and interfering in my life?"

"I'm not sure that I can," he said solemnly. Katie felt a disconcerting little thrill of pleasure scamper along her spine.

"You're a brilliant businessman. I'm sure you can do anything you set your mind to," she corrected.

He shrugged. "Okay, then. Maybe I don't want to."

"Why?"

This time he sighed, and the dark eyes that met hers were troubled. "I don't know."

"Well maybe you'll let me know someday. Now I'm going to take a bath," she snapped. "You can use the guest bathroom. Lisa will show you where it is. She can throw your clothes in the dryer, if you like."

"That's okay. I have an extra pair of pants and a shirt in the car."

Of course he did, she thought, seething as she stomped upstairs and filled the tub with steaming water and bubbles. Men like Ross probably always carried around a change of clothes. They never knew where they'd be waking up in the morning.

Men like Ross! She sniffed, throwing her soaked clothes on the floor. What a laugh! There were no other men like Ross. Not that she'd found so far. But, dammit all, she had every intention of looking for them. It would be nice if the one she found wasn't quite so domineering, though.

When she went back downstairs, she found Ross and Lisa in the kitchen, laughing as they fixed dinner. This was not the sedate, professional Ross of Chandler Electronics or the rakish man-about-town. This was Ross the purely masculine being who could make a woman's breath catch in her throat. Katie's caught and held as her pulse skittered crazily. Ross's damp and tousled hair glimmered with intriguing highlights. He had an apron tied

around his waist, a grin on his face, and no shoes. Lisa was accusing him of being all thumbs as he tried to peel the carrots, and he was taking the criticism to heart.

"This is not something I do every day," he complained, just barely missing his thumb.

"So, you're one of those," Lisa said, as Katie listened and watched from the doorway.

"One of those what?"

"One of those male chauvinists like my dad. He thought my mom should do all the cooking and cleaning and stuff."

"And you think that's wrong?"

"If you'd ever eaten her cooking, you'd know it is."

Ross's laughter echoed off the walls, and Katie found herself joining in despite herself.

"Since I'm so awful in the kitchen, does that mean you plan to cook dinner for us tonight?"

"Sure. Most of it is started already. Mr. Chandler's been helping."

Ross noted the calculated gleam in Lisa's eyes as she grinned impishly up at him. "Why don't you two go have a drink or something?"

Once he and Katie had been urged off to the living room, he settled down in one of the comfortable, oversized lounge chairs and looked around. The room was exactly as he'd imagined Katie's home would be: cheerful, warm, and inviting. The furniture was made for comfort, the colors chosen for their brightness. It would be impossible to be miserable in a room like this, especially with a fire blazing to chase away the Seattle dampness.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked him now. "You're frowning."

He stared into the fire, then finally back at Katie. "What would it take to make you happy?"

She bit her lip and gazed at the floor. After a long thoughtful pause, she said,

"That's a hard question to answer. I'm not sure I know."

"What's so hard about it?" Ross asked.

She smiled at him then, a slow, teasing smile that had the warmth of a summer sun. "There are degrees of happiness. A rainbow can make you feel good for a minute. A movie can make you laugh for a couple of hours. A child's hug can give you an instant's joy." Her expression had turned dreamy, and he wondered what she was thinking.

"What else, Katie?" His voice was hoarse as he felt the tension between them thrum with a sudden awareness. It was an exquisitely sweet tension that had been building for days now, maybe longer.

"A kiss," she said, her gaze meeting his boldly, then faltering.

He leaned closer, his lips ready for just such a kiss, for the heat and sweetness he knew it could yield. "What does a kiss do, lovely Katie?"

Confusion flitted across her face. "It changes things," she said quietly, and moved away, only inches, but it might as well have been a mile.

"Yes," he said solemnly. "It does change things." What, he wondered, would it have changed for them?

Before he could think that through, Lisa announced that dinner was ready. They ate around the kitchen table, and Ross couldn't remember a time when he'd felt so content. It was as if the restlessness he'd been feeling for months, maybe even years, had vanished, replaced by a longed-for sense of peace and family.

The thought caught him by surprise, and he glanced around the table. Lisa was teasing Katie again, and the two of them were laughing, their eyes sparkling.

Seeing her this way, relaxed and smiling, made her seem more attractive than ever. A powerful desire to complete the picture, to sweep her into his arms and carry her back up those stairs and make

love to her, ripped through him and left his heart hammering in his chest.

A home. That's what had been missing in his life.

Dear Feisty,

Just how feisty are you? I like a woman who stands up for herself. Does that mean you're liberated as well? Drop me a note with your phone number and I'll give you a call.

—Ben

Ross came up behind Katie on Monday morning, put his hands on the back of her chair, and peered over her shoulder as she was typing. As his warm breath whispered past her ear, she promptly made three mistakes in as many words.

Ever since Saturday, she hadn't been able to get him out of her mind. He'd been in the oddest mood when he left—distracted, yet strangely pleased about something. It had unnerved her even more than his appearance at Green Lake; the surprising, disturbing heat of his body next to hers, the gentle gruffness she'd heard in his voice when he'd plucked her from the water, the instant rapport he'd had with Lisa.

"Is that the report I need?" he asked now.

She looked up at Ross and gave him a wavering smile. "Nope. The report's on your desk."

"Then what's this?" he asked, determinedly nudging her out of the way. He read it, then scowled at her. "Not another one?"

"Yes, another one," she mimicked. She'd rather liked the idea of just sending a letter, instead of calling. It put the ball back in Ben's court. If he wanted to get in touch, he could. If not, she'd only wasted the price of a stamp, and at least she'd done something to counter the disconcerting effect Ross seemed to be having on her all of a sudden.

That tender almost-kiss on Saturday had left her feeling strangely empty and far more alone than she'd felt when Paul had walked out. She'd fought the yearning all day Sunday, using clearheaded logic and a marathon, backbreaking effort to rid the yard of fall leaves. It hadn't worked. Her dreams last night, with Ross at the center of every one of them, had been astonishingly sensual, and she'd awakened today feeling more restless than ever.

"Dammit, Katie, I thought we'd settled this," Ross snapped, bringing her sharply back to the present.

"We haven't settled anything. It's none of your business."

"But the other night—"

"The other night was fun. Period." Dammit, that was all she was going to let it be. She was not going to set herself up for some brief fling with her boss, a fling that would force her to go out on a job hunt when it was over. And it would be over, she had no doubts about that.

"It was more than fun," he was insisting now.

She sighed. "Okay. We had a great time. But just because we spent one pleasant, friendly evening together, that still doesn't give you any rights where I'm concerned. You don't hear me telling you whom to date. I'm your assistant here, not your mother. And," she said with added emphasis, "you are not my father."

Which was certainly true enough, Ross thought as he threw up his hands and stalked out of her office muttering to himself about the perversity of women. You'd think Katie would be grateful that he wanted to look out for her. She'd advertised for a damned Prince Charming. What was wrong with a knight in shining armor? Instead of being pleased about his concern, she was balking like a teenager whose parents were too strict.

But since that was the way she felt, he'd

better wise up. If he didn't want her to start resenting him, if he wanted her to confide in him, he was just going to have to learn to keep his mouth shut. However, the whole idea of sitting back and watching while Katie walked into trouble with that sweet, trusting smile on her face was too much for him. They'd probably cart him off in a straitjacket before it was all over.

He got a chance to practice his vow of silence a few days later. He was with Katie, going over a complex new clause in the Simpson contract, when that Ben person she'd been writing to the other day called.

Ross could only hear Katie's end of the conversation, since she smacked his hand every time he attempted to put the call on the speaker phone. When she offered to call the guy back, Ross's brows lifted quizzically. What kind of deadbeat was this guy? Didn't he even want to pay for a long-distance call?

As soon as the call ended, with Katie agreeing to meet Ben later in the afternoon for a drink, Ross couldn't help it. He badgered her with questions.

"Why did you offer to call back? Is the guy that cheap?" he grumbled.

"He was at a pay phone. He had to keep hunting for more change. It seemed like it might be simpler for me to call back."

"I don't like the sound of this. He's probably married or in the middle of a messy divorce," Ross said suspiciously, his lips settling into a hard, forbidding line. "He probably doesn't want any record of the call on his phone bill. That must be what he meant when he wrote and asked if you were liberated. He was trying to see if you'd fool around with a married man."

Katie regarded him in astonishment. "You have the most incredible imagination. Do you hold all other men in such low esteem?"

"No. Just this guy."

"Ross, I am only meeting the man for a drink. I'm not starting up a relationship. I'm sure there's a logical explanation for the pay phone. Why are you making such a big deal about it?"

He sighed. "You already know the answer to that. Because you're a babe in the woods. You need protection. You might just have a drink today, but what if you fall for the guy and then find out he's married? What then? You'll be moping around here, crying all the time. I won't be able to stand it."

Katie couldn't help it. She laughed, sobering only when she realized that Ross didn't think he was being the least bit funny. His scowl was ferocious.

"This is nothing to laugh about," he muttered indignantly.

"Oh, no, you don't. You are not coming on this date, Ross," she said, icy sparks glinting in her eyes. "This is my date. You get your own date."

But Ross suddenly realized he didn't want to get his own date. He wanted Katie. That was what these crazy sensations were all about, he thought in bemusement. He was falling in love with Katie! No, scratch that. He was in love with Katie. Head-over-heels, impossible-to-ignore in love. And Katie was only interested in dating a bunch of strange men who obviously weren't worthy of her. Good grief, she'd even prefer going out with a married man to going out with him!

Short of burning the letters, how was he going to get her to stop playing the field and to see him in a new light? A woman like Katie deserved the best. A courtship worthy of Prince Charming—wasn't that what she'd said she wanted?

Flowers, he decided. Candy. No, better than that. It had to be more intriguing, something she couldn't dismiss or ignore.

Damn, he wished she'd tell him where she was meeting the guy. It was probably

some out-of-the-way dive where Ben wouldn't be recognized. Ross knew he could follow her again, but she would probably call the police as she'd threatened. She was fed up with his meddling. She'd made that plain enough. He ought to just leave it be.

He couldn't do it. At six o'clock, thoroughly disgusted with his inability to take his own good advice, he found himself ringing Katie's doorbell. He was hoping, but not really expecting, that it would be Katie who answered the door.

It was Lisa.

"Hi, Mr. Chandler. Mom's not here."

"It figures," he muttered.

She peered at him with concern. "Are you okay?"

"No. Mind if I wait?"

"Help yourself," she said, gesturing toward the living room. "Want some dinner? I was just about to make mine. Mom said she'd be a little late. She's meeting some guy for a drink."

Ross's expression brightened. "Did she say where?"

Lisa grinned at him impishly. "As a matter of fact, she did. She also said she'd wring my neck if I told you."

His face fell. "I see."

"She didn't say you couldn't wait here, though."

He trailed into the kitchen after Lisa and sat down at the table.

"Lisa, what does your mother like to do?"

Lisa shrugged. "I don't know. The usual stuff, I suppose."

"What sort of stuff? Does she like going out to restaurants?"

Suddenly, Lisa grinned perceptively. "Oh, I get it. You want to take her someplace special."

He chuckled. "You must drive your mother crazy."

"Why?"

"You're very bright."

"She says I'm too smart for my own good."

"A kid can never be too smart," he said. "So, what about the restaurants?"

"I don't think so. At least she and my dad never did that, and since he left, the fanciest place we've been is one of the seafood places on the water over in Edmonds. We didn't even go there for the food. She wanted to watch the sunset." Lisa sat down opposite him and propped her chin in her hand, reminding him of Katie when she was thinking through a problem. "Sometimes she likes to ride the ferry."

"Anything else?"

"She likes classical music, especially the flute. And she likes to go for walks around Green Lake."

Ross winced at the reminder. "I don't think Green Lake is such a good idea."

"How about Pike Place Market? She loves to wander around down there and poke at the vegetables and stuff. I think she even likes that yucky fish smell."

Ross was beginning to see that courting Katie wasn't going to be like anything he'd ever done before. Ironically, he found that he liked the idea of doing new things with her, things he'd never shared with anyone else. And unless he was wildly off the mark, she'd never done those things with another man. It sounded as though she and Lisa had been their own best pals, the two musketeers.

Now, though, if he had anything to say about it, there were going to be three. The three musketeers. The way it should be.

Dear Enchantress,

You intrigue me. With your red hair, I'll bet you have the most incredible eyes. Blue, probably. What more could any man ask than to spend the rest of his days beholding such beauty? The image of you fills my dreams, and yet you are alone. Why? What are you looking for from life?

Adventure? Romance? I hope someday to find out.

Katie turned the note over looking for a signature, a phone number, something. There wasn't even a return address on the envelope.

How odd, she thought, and started to toss the letter into the trash. It had come in the last batch of mail. There'd been only two letters this time, and this one intrigued her in a way she couldn't quite explain.

Maybe it was the man's poetic way with words, his attempt to describe her without ever having met her—and in such romantic terms, too. Maybe it was the bold typeface, which suggested a man who'd chosen his typewriter to match a strong, aggressive personality, while his anonymity suggested shyness. It was an alluring combination.

More likely, she was fascinated simply because there was an air of mystery to it. She was just perverse enough to feel an instinctive attraction to a man who wouldn't even identify himself. It appealed to that need she'd felt lately to take more risks, to open herself to new adventures. Admittedly, it also helped to take her mind off Ross for a few minutes.

Whatever the real attraction was, she couldn't bring herself to throw the letter out. She tucked it back into its envelope and put it into her briefcase. Several times during the day, she caught herself wondering about the mysterious man who'd written it, wondering if he'd ever declare himself.

She didn't have a lot of time for such daydreaming, however. She was swamped with work. She was deep in a report when the piped-in background music in the office suddenly scratched to a halt. Normally, it was so unobtrusive she didn't even notice it, but it was impossible to ignore the horrible screeching sound. Katie stuck her head out the door and spoke to

the secretary.

"Paula, what on earth was that?"

"I don't know." Paula shivered dramatically. "If it does it again, though, I'm going out for coffee. I may even take the rest of the day off. The sound gives me the creeps. It reminds me of chalk on a blackboard."

A moment later, the music started again. Classical, Katie noted in surprise. Mozart's Quartet in G Major. Her face lit with a smile at the sound of the flutes, and she was transported to a field where she'd spent a wonderful day last summer listening to a chamber-music concert with wildflowers all around and the sunshine brushing her shoulders with a golden heat.

Paula was listening to the music with an expression of astonishment on her face. "When did the boss start going for classical music?"

"What does Ross have to do with this? I thought we paid for some service."

"We do, but he was asking about the music system this morning. I just assumed he was the one who was in there tampering with the hookup."

Ross suddenly emerged from his office.

"What do you think?" he asked, his eyes flashing excitement.

"It beats 'Fly Me to the Moon'," Paula said.

"I think it's wonderful," Katie added, staring at Ross in utter fascination. This was yet another new side to him. "What brought on the change?"

"Oh, I just thought it was time we had some different music around here. Something a little more high-class." He shot Katie a speculative glance. "Do you really like it?"

"Mm-hm. I love anything with flutes, and the Mozart flute quartets are wonderful."

He nodded in satisfaction. "Good. I just have a tape on now. I'll call the service

and tell them we want to switch from easy listening to classical." He turned around and went back in his office, but not before Katie caught the oddly satisfied expression on his face.

She knew that something had shifted in their relationship over the last few weeks. They'd gone from being respectful business associates to something more, but what? There were strong undercurrents every time they were in a room together, a sexual pull that hadn't been there before. But a love affair would complicate their excellent working relationship in ways she couldn't even begin to imagine.

It was nearly midnight Friday, after a long week of similar undercurrents, when she felt Ross's hands on her shoulders, massaging away the tension. The first touch filled her with contentment as a subtle warmth stole over her. A Bach flute sonata flooded the air with joyous sound, and her contentment deepened.

Ross's touch changed so subtly that at first she wasn't even aware that it had gone from a friendly gesture to a sensual assault. Fingers slid beneath her hair to caress her neck. A new tension came back to replace the one just eased, a different sort of tension entirely, one that was achingly sweet. Lips touched her ear, then a tongue dipped into that shell, sending shock waves rippling through her. Warmth became a white heat that settled low in her abdomen.

In this setting with any other man, she'd have been screaming about sexual harassment. Even now, she thought briefly of protesting, but the feelings were first too tempting, then too demanding. This wasn't just any man, it was Ross . . . and she wanted more.

"Come here, Katie," he whispered, his voice hoarse with longing. "Please."

She was powerless to refuse. No, not powerless. Unwilling. He drew her up and into his arms at last, their bodies sepa-

rated for an instant by hesitancy, then together, a perfect fit. The kiss . . . ah, the kiss was something else. Slowly and leisurely, his lips explored, then plundered with a need that took her by surprise.

A shudder finally swept through both of them, and then he was stepping back, drawing in ragged breaths, his fingers digging into her arms. There was a raw and urgent hunger in his eyes that stunned her.

Her still-startled gaze was locked with Ross's for an eternity before Katie finally blushed in embarrassment and pulled away.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I don't know what got into me."

Ross shook his head. "No, I'm the one who should be apologizing." He met her gaze evenly. "But I won't. I wanted to do that."

"Why?"

"Because you're a very desirable woman."

She sucked in her breath and eyed him cautiously. "I never knew you thought of me that way."

"These days I hardly think of anything else."

"You're just tired," she said, seeking a justification that wouldn't alter things between them irrevocably, even though her heart screamed that it was too late. "We have to work together. I think it's better if things stay the same between us. Let's not mess up our working relationship by playing with fire." It was a halfhearted protest at best, filled with logic but empty of conviction.

He knew it, and he grinned at her. "Does that mean you feel the fire, too?"

She couldn't look away from the oddly hopeful glint in his eyes. "Yes," she finally admitted in a soft whisper, her vision suddenly misty with unexpected tears.

Ross beamed, obviously delighted by her answer and unaware of what it had cost her to make it. "Well, now, Mrs. Ste-

wart, I think you and I have some plans to make."

"Plans?"

"How would you like to go on a ferry ride tomorrow? If the weather's nice, we could take along a picnic."

It sounded simple and familiar. It sounded wonderful. "You really want to go on a ferry ride and a picnic?"

"Is that so astonishing?"

"Yes," she said bluntly. He chuckled at her wide-eyed expression. "Why, Ross?" She regarded him suspiciously. "Are you just trying to keep me from going on another one of those dates?"

"No. I'm trying to take you on a date myself. I must be out of practice. Usually, my intentions are much clearer."

"Ross, I'm not your type. I'm not so sophisticated," she said, not even hearing him when he muttered, "No. Thank God."

She wasn't sure why she felt this need to talk him out of a date she very much wanted to go on. Suddenly, she was scared—terrified, in fact. What if she discovered that the lure of the unobtainable was more fascinating than the reality? Worse, what if Ross left her as Paul had? This time the hurt would be unendurable.

Was she worrying too much again? To her confusion, Ross wasn't exactly plunging her into a whirlwind tour of the high life. He wanted to take her on a ferry ride, a simple, run-of-the-mill ferry ride. Something she'd done a hundred times. Something she loved.

"What time?" she said at last. One small step for the old, brave Katie.

"I'll pick you up at noon. Wear something warm in case we don't get home until late."

The next day they drove downtown to the ferry in silence, driving the car onto the boat, then going upstairs to the lounge, where Ross brought them each a cup of coffee and found seats by the win-

dow. It wasn't the best sort of day for a ferry ride. The sky was gray, the water shrouded in mist. Yet that was the way Katie preferred it.

Ross leaned back in the seat across from her and in sheer fascination watched the delightful play of expressions on her face. She was like a kid at Christmas—or a woman in love—her eyes alight with excitement, her mouth curved ever so slightly into a dreamy smile. She turned and caught him looking at her.

"What are you grinning about?" she asked.

"You. You really do love this, don't you?"

"Don't you?"

"I've never really thought about it. I only take the ferry when I need to get across to one of the islands."

"But just look out there. Look at the water, how smooth it is. And the sun filtering through the mist." She pointed. "And over there, the first sight of land, like Brigadoon rising in the fog. You can believe in enchantment on a day like this."

Ross believed. He believed more than ever that he needed Katie in his life. Katie who could make the simple pleasures so special; Katie who still believed in fairy tales and happily ever after. If only she'd realize that she'd been looking for a man in all the wrong places.

Ah, Enchantress,

My dreams have been filled with you. I see you running barefoot through country fields, your red hair curling about your face in a fiery halo. I feel your lips on mine, tasting of wild strawberries. I wonder how much longer we must be apart, and then I remind myself that an anticipation so sweet can only lead to a magical reality. I await the reality with pleasure. Write to me, Enchantress. Tell me your dreams; so I can make them come true.

No name again, but there was an ad-

dress this time, a post office box, Katie noted as a wayward shiver of excitement tripped down her spine. She tried reminding herself that the guy could be some sort of nut, but it didn't matter. Even if he were, he had the gentle soul of a poet. He wrote the most exquisitely romantic things, and he wanted to know about her dreams.

What were they? she wondered. Once there had been so many dreams. Once she'd made crazy, improbable plans for her life. But it had been a long time since she'd even dared to dream, much less acted on those dreams.

Once, for instance, she had longed for just this sort of romance—provocative, enticing. Should she write and tell him that? Ross would have a fit. Even Jennifer and Maggie would think she was crazy. Or would they? They were the ones who'd encouraged her to start living again, to be a little reckless. Maybe she should listen to them. Maybe she should remember the days when she'd done things on a whim, when the lure of the sun had been enough to draw her outside, when a whisper of wind had beckoned her and she'd followed, filled with joy. How important was it for her to recapture those days before time and opportunity slipped away? Would a letter to a stranger do it?

"It might be a start," she whispered to herself. "Just write."

My Enchantress,

I received your letter. You can't imagine what it meant to me. You are just as open and honest as I'd hoped. I feel I know you better already. It seems you're a bit of a daredevil. I, too, think it would be exciting to go on an African safari. Let's do it. I'm not so sure about the mountain climbing in Tibet, but I'm game if you are. I've picked out the perfect fountain for us to wade in. I hope you haven't met some other man who will keep us from spending the

rest of our lives together doing the unexpected and going wherever our impulses lead us. I live for that moment, and I hope you are starting to as well. Every day will be filled with magic and excitement as long as we're together.

A week after she'd replied to her secret admirer, the letter had come to the office accompanied by roses, beautiful long-stemmed yellow roses that had filled the air with a glorious perfume and Ross's eyes with a speculative glimmer. He hadn't said a word, though. Not one word. His refusal even to acknowledge the flowers left Katie feeling vaguely let down and irritable.

She'd brought the letter home with her and read it again and again this morning, trying to boost her morale. It wasn't working. She folded the letter finally and tucked it back into its envelope with a sigh.

The letter had promised excitement, reminding her of all the things she felt her life had been missing. She gazed at the stack of laundry waiting to be ironed and thought of the Taj Mahal. She scowled at the dishes piled in the sink and envisioned a coral reef in the Caribbean. Then she sighed. She could use a little excitement about now. Surely there were things she could do that would be more thrilling than looking at her reflection in a clean plate or watching the wrinkles disappear from the no-iron blouses that never seemed quite neat enough when she took them from the dryer. Impulsively, she sat down and poured all her frustrations into yet another letter to her mysterious suitor.

In spite of her secret correspondence, her feelings for Ross were undeniably growing. Every time Ross stepped into her office, the tension between them built. He was carefully distant, though the look in his eyes practically seared her with its intensity. Not only did it make her forget all about the letters, it practically made her forget her own name. When their

hands accidentally brushed, she felt the vibration all the way down to her toes. She was worse than a teenager embroiled in a fatal case of first love.

By Saturday, when Ross showed up to work in the yard in an old pair of jeans that were molded to his body in a way that was just this side of indecent, Katie had trouble keeping her mind on raking leaves. She'd made a decision. All that was left was finding the courage to follow through. More than once Ross caught her leaning on her rake, her eyes following him, her breath caught in her throat.

"I'm not paying you to stand around and gaze at the scenery," he taunted.

"You're not paying me at all," she reminded him.

"True." His eyes skimmed over her, lingering where her T-shirt skimmed over her breasts. Her instantaneous, helpless reaction made his pulse race and his control slip. He ought to be pushing the lawn mover around the yard until he was ready to drop in exhaustion. Instead, he turned off the motor.

"Why don't we both take a break?" he suggested. "I could use a beer. It's hotter out here than I thought."

He didn't explain that what was stirring the heat in the two of them had nothing to do with the late-afternoon temperature—which was sixty degrees—or the activity, which was hardly that strenuous. A beer might be able to get his mind off that puzzled little look that came into Katie's eyes every now and then when she was expecting a kiss he didn't deliver. It might also keep his hands off her.

When she came back with the beers, they sat down on the back steps.

"Ross, can I ask you a question?" she asked, her voice tentative.

"Sure," he said, still playing the scene as casually as he could.

"Why haven't you kissed me again?"

It was the attempt at bravery that undid

him, the uncharacteristic boldness edged with vulnerability. He wanted to kiss her right then, but a kiss would lead to more than either of them had bargained for.

"Well . . ." he began. He cleared his throat. He met her gaze, blinked, looked away, and finally back again. "You made it pretty clear that you thought we should just be friends." He swallowed with difficulty. "For now," he amended.

"Friends kiss," she said, a smile suddenly playing about her lips.

"Not the way I want to kiss you," he muttered. "Not the way we kissed before."

"Then you do still want to?" she said with what sounded like a sigh of relief.

"Katie, do we have to talk about this?"

"I think so. Why? Does it bother you?"

"It's driving me crazy," he admitted, putting down his can of beer and drawing her into his arms.

His lips slanted across hers, coaxing them apart, tasting the cool beer, reveling in the feel of silk. Katie sighed happily and his tongue invaded her mouth, searching for the sweetest nectar, stirring their blood until both of them knew that this time a kiss would never be enough.

He tried to draw away, to stop before it was too late, but she clung to him, her hands skimming along his spine, then kneading in a pattern of incredible torment.

"I thought you only wanted a kiss," he murmured huskily.

"I was wrong," she said. "It's not enough. I want you to love me."

"What about Lisa?" he asked.

"She's staying with a friend."

There was a low moan in Ross's throat, and he managed to untangle himself from Katie's caressing hands. "Wait."

"I don't want to wait. I want to be impulsive for once in my life, to do what feels right this minute."

"Katie love, I don't want you to have

regrets. Not today. Not ever."

"I won't, Ross. There won't be any regrets." She gazed at him, eyes shining. "No matter what."

A part of Ross wanted to refuse, tried desperately to remember . . . remember what? That what he wanted with Katie was forever, not for an afternoon. But he wasn't strong enough to say no, not when he wanted to make love with her just as much as she wanted him to.

Katie needed to blot out all thoughts of mysterious strangers and wild adventures. She needed to discover if the wildest adventure of all could be right there in Ross's arms.

"Inside, Katie," Ross was saying as he lifted her in his arms and cradled her against his chest.

"Where to?" he said when he reached the hallway. "The living room? The bedroom?"

"Both of them," she said. "Maybe even the kitchen, too."

"My God," he moaned as Katie, laughing, pointed up the stairs, then directed him to her room.

Once there Ross placed her gently on the bed, then stood and stripped off his clothes, then hers. Finally he joined her on the tousled covers. He ran his hands along the length of her, like a sculptor anxious to know every perfect curve of his masterpiece. The gentle swell of a breast; the deliciously rounded buttocks; the smooth, flat stomach; the tantalizing dip between tiny waistline and flaring hip; the sleek line of a leg; then back again, feeling her tremble as each touch became more intimate. Then Katie's leg draped over his thigh, thrusting her hips against his in a way that demanded an end to subtlety and innocence and a return to passion.

Excitement built to a feverish intensity as Katie gave herself to him, offering up her body, hips arching into his, seeking as she cried out his name, urging him to love

her. Ross poised over her and gazed into her eyes, which were wide and bright and anxious.

"Now, Ross, please. Love me now."

He lowered himself gently, until they were joined together. There was only feeling now, a spectacular, exquisite tension, followed by a rainbow's burst of color and a joyous release that tumbled them back from the heavens and left them both damp and tired and sated.

Katie wouldn't let Ross leave her. "Stay with me."

"I'm too heavy."

"No. I need to feel you. I need to know this was real and not just a glorious dream."

He kissed away the dampness on her cheek. Perspiration, or a tear? "Are you okay, Katie love?"

"I'm fine." She held on tighter.

She was fine. Terrific, in fact. Ross was everything she'd ever needed, everything she could possible want. In his arms, she'd found the unexpected, felt unsurpassed excitement, gone beyond her wildest dreams. She'd experienced the act of love before, but in all her years of marriage she had never felt completed, never felt such vivid sensations, and not once had she known what it was to lose herself in such exquisite ecstasy. She'd been tempted by a fantasy, but fate had intervened and given her a more spectacular reality.

They made love again and again through the night, each time as new and fascinating and thrilling as the first. They spent Sunday morning feeding each other bits of scrambled egg and toast spread with orange marmalade, laughing over the comics, arguing about politics, and, finally, making love once more.

The memory of the wickedly pleasurable weekend carried Katie into the next week on a cloud. It should have lasted her forever.

But then the mail came.

Enchantress,

My love, suddenly I have so many doubts. Over the last few weeks, I feel I have gotten to know you through your refreshingly candid letters. You are an intriguing woman who could keep a man endlessly fascinated. Yet I sense an ambivalence in you that worries me. I fear I could be losing you. There's so much I'd like to tell you, but I must have a sign before I speak. If you are not committed to another, please meet me at the base of the Space Needle at six o'clock on Friday. Until then . . .

It had been raining for five straight days when the letter came. The sky was an endless, depressing gray, and the persistent fine mist created a chilling dampness that made the bones ache and the mind wander.

Katie's mind was far from Chandler Electronics even before the arrival of the mail. Her thoughts were in Los Angeles with Ross, who'd been away for three days, probably basking in the sun on the beach, she thought resentfully and unfairly. She knew perfectly well he was spending his time in business meetings. He'd called every night to tell her about his day, to ask about hers.

Ross apparently didn't believe in long-distance romance, however. The calls were brisk and businesslike and unsatisfying, not at all like having the same sort of conversation whispered across a pillow. And after only a few short weeks, she'd grown to count on those late-night talks, those stolen moments when Lisa was staying over with a friend and she and Ross could spend an entire night in each other's arms.

In the last week or so, though, he'd seemed increasingly distracted. He wasn't nearly as attentive as he had been when their romance was first heating up. She'd

tried to probe for explanations, but he'd denied that anything had changed. Much as she hated the possibility, she wondered if he was one of those men whose interest waned as soon as the thrill of the chase ended.

As a result of the rotten weather and Ross's distant mood, Katie felt lonely and restless. She was ripe for something to break the monotony, to brighten her own mood. This latest letter was made to order. Her hand was actually shaking when she finished reading it. After several weeks of increasingly frequent correspondence, her mystery man wanted to meet her at last. Excitement surged through her, followed by temptation, then hesitation. What should she do? What the hell should she do?

She couldn't deny a strong desire to meet the author of the notes, the man who seemed to know her so well and who had made such ardent declarations of love without ever having met her. She wanted to see for herself if he was as romantic, bold, and fascinating as he seemed. She wanted to know if he was rich or poor, if he only dreamed of adventures or if he made them happen. He'd asked so much of her, but told her so little about himself in return. Her curiosity, which had begun to abate in the warm afterglow of falling in love with Ross, was suddenly killing her.

Curiosity killed the cat.

The familiar warning taunted her.

Satisfaction brought it back.

Would there be any satisfaction in knowing, or only disappointment, an end to a fantasy?

And there was Ross to consider. He would be back on Friday morning. How on earth would he react if he knew she was going to meet another man after their relationship had progressed into such a passionate intimacy?

The internal debate kept her awake all night Thursday and made her feel incredi-

bly guilty when Ross came into her office on Friday morning bearing a present, a tiny gold unicorn pendant to remind her of how she'd cried when they'd watched *The Glass Menagerie* together on the late-night movie.

Throughout the day, guilt plagued her. Every time Ross kissed her, she felt another twinge. She'd even compounded her dilemma by convincing herself that by not going she would be betraying this other man. By refusing to meet him, it would seem as though she'd just been leading him on. What an unbelievable fix for a woman who'd had no men at all in her life just a couple of months ago!

"Are you okay?" Ross finally asked, picking up on her odd mood.

"Fine."

His penetrating gaze made her squirm uncomfortably. "Are you sure there's not something you'd like to talk about?" he probed.

She shook her head, then wondered at the shuttered look that came into his eyes as he shrugged and walked away.

To go or not to go? The question taunted her all day. Why not go? she decided finally. She and Ross didn't have plans until later in the evening. She could at least go to the Space Needle, meet the man, and tell him that she was involved with someone else. It would be the polite thing to do, sort of like telling an old lover in person that the affair was through. Afterward, she would tell Ross all about it. There would be no betrayal.

Still, once the decision had been made, she turned into a nervous wreck, jumping like a scared cat every time her intercom buzzed and she heard Ross's voice. She still felt like a traitor. Ross seemed oddly distracted as well, casting speculative glances in her direction throughout the endless afternoon. Those puzzled looks of his only added to the uneasy atmosphere around the office.

At five o'clock her plans, so carefully laid out, went completely haywire. Ross tore into her office, running his fingers through his dark hair in a gesture she'd come to recognize as the first sign of intense agitation.

"We've got problems with the Simpson account. You've got to help me come up with a new contract. It might take hours."

Katie sighed with relief, realizing that she hadn't really wanted to meet her mysterious man after all.

She and Ross worked nonstop till after nine, then called it a night.

"Let's go eat," he said, helping her into her jacket.

"Great. I'm starving!"

In less than half an hour, they were at Ross's apartment, settled in front of the fire with a lavish spread of hamburgers, fries, and milk shakes. When Katie had finished the last french fry, she leaned back against the sofa with a sigh.

"That's much better."

"You're sure you're not going to starve now?" Ross teased.

"Nope. Two cheeseburgers ought to hold me through the night."

"If they don't the double order of fries will." He leaned back next to her, shifting so that their legs brushed and his fingers could rest on her thigh.

"Something's been on your mind the last couple of days. You want to talk about it?"

Ross's question shocked Katie out of her contented lethargy.

"It doesn't matter now. We can talk about it some other time. You must be exhausted."

"I'm not too tired to listen to you. Come on, Katie. Get whatever it is off your chest."

"You're not going to like it."

"I figured that much out. Otherwise, you wouldn't be looking as though you were facing a date with an executioner."

She took a deep breath. "I had another one of those dates tonight," she finally blurted out as he just stared at her, his heart thudding to a stop as she rambled on nervously. "I mean, I didn't really go on it, because of what happened at the office, but I was going to go, and I wouldn't blame you for being furious."

"I see."

The words hung in the air. Katie squirmed.

"Go on. Say something," she finally muttered.

"I don't know what to say. I'm surprised, I guess. I've been thinking that what we have is pretty special."

Her wide blue eyes met his gaze, then faltered. "I think so, too."

"Then why were you going?"

"I'm not really sure."

"And this is one of the men who answered your ad?"

She nodded miserably. "I'm sorry. I feel like a rat. I know we haven't made any commitment, but all day I've felt like such a cheat."

"Katie, you have the right to date other men. You're right. We haven't made any commitment." It cost him the last vestiges of his sanity to get those words past lips gone suddenly dry. "If you feel the need to experiment, to see what's out there, I won't interfere the way I did before."

"You won't?"

"No."

Suddenly anger exploded inside her. "You say this *now* after you've followed me around for weeks! I'm sick of this, Ross Chandler. Do you realize I actually thought I was in love with you? How could I love a man who's so damned terrified of commitment that he simply wants to hang around with me and my daughter, instead of getting married and having a real family? I must have been out of my mind. You don't want me, but you don't want anyone else to have me, either. Well,

you and all your insecurities and jealousy can go take a flying leap."

Ross was silent, and she glared at him.

"Are you quite sure you're through?" he asked finally. Suddenly, he seemed incredibly calm.

Katie's temper cooled, and her voice faltered. "I . . . I guess so."

"Be sure," he warned, "because I'm not up to another tirade."

"Okay, yes. I'm through."

"Now it's my turn."

"Ross, I don't want to hear your excuses."

"I didn't much want to listen to your wild accusations, but I did. Give me the same courtesy."

She glowered at him.

"I'm the man you were supposed to meet tonight. I wrote the letters."

The beat of Katie's heart slowed, then accelerated. She felt as though her wildest dream had suddenly become a reality, but such things didn't happen. Or did they?

"You?" she said incredulously, her eyes filling with wonder. A shock of insight flashed through her, and she knew it was true. Only Ross could have known her so well.

Then she thought about all the terrible things she'd just said to him and felt herself go pale. It was pretty amazing that he hadn't just turned around and walked away.

"I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you I'd known all along," she suggested hopefully.

His lips twitched, then curved into a full-fledged grin. "Not a chance."

"I didn't think so," she said with an exaggerated sigh. "I'm sorry for yelling at you, but can you blame me?"

"I suppose not," he conceded reluctantly.

"I still don't understand why you'd send those letters, when we were already seeing each other."

"That's the tough one." He shrugged. "Caution. Maybe even fear."

"Fear? Of what?" Her expression was disbelieving. Ross wasn't afraid of anything.

"Well, you seemed to be more interested in finding a stranger to fall in love with than you were in dating me. At first, when you thought I had a hundred women on the string, you decided I was too wild for you. Then, when you found out I wasn't like that, that I enjoyed simple family life, it seemed to scare you even more. I decided I'd better hedge my bets. If I couldn't get you to fall for me, the guy writing the letters had another shot at it."

Katie gazed up at him. "I don't believe this."

"I'm not exactly positive about what's been going on for the last couple months myself. Who are you in love with? Me or the guy who wrote the letters?"

She grinned at him impishly, her heart thundering against her ribs at the realization that she wouldn't have to choose. She could have it all. Was it at all possible that on some level she had known? Probably not.

"Who says I'm in love with anyone?" she inquired sweetly.

"Katie!"

"Alright, I am, I guess."

"Will you marry me, Katie Stewart?" he said solemnly.

"Which one of you?" she couldn't resist asking.

"Both of us."

"That's bigamy."

"Not in this case."

"Then, yes, I'll marry you, both of you, whatever."

"It does get confusing, doesn't it?" he said and kissed her, his lips warm and tender against hers. ♥



Dreams Of Joe

Everyone in town had plans for Abby Fisher and Joe Gilbraith, but Joe, an ex-pro quarterback, had a romantic game plan all his own. But he needed the help of a small lost dog to finally break down the attractive widow's defenses.

BILLIE GREEN

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"... and although the men are not known to be armed, official sources advise that they should be considered dangerous. The escape of the prisoners yesterday has aroused speculation about the adequacy of the county facilities, renewing interest in the upcoming bond issue. In a recent interview, County Commissioner Henderson warned—"

"Jeffrey Fisher, I thought I told you not to bring that radio!" Abby turned around to look down at her ten-year-old son in

exasperation.

"It's not mine. It's Chuck's," he protested, holding the now-silent portable behind his back. "And anyway, you should be glad we have it. Those murderers could be hiding in the trees watching us right now."

"They aren't murderers," Abby Fisher said irritably. "They held up a grocery store."

"They could have killed people that nobody knows about." His voice had

dropped to an ominous whisper. "And they're desperate. You know what they say about desperate men."

"No, I don't. And neither do you, so button up. You're scaring Harrison."

"He's not scared." He darted a glance over his shoulder at a chubby blond boy who stood on the narrow path with his hand pressed to his mouth. "Are you, Harry? Why, if those guys are sneaking around in the woods, we can take care of 'em. We'll just—" He broke off abruptly when Harrison bounded into the trees. "Holy cow," he muttered under his breath, then turned to smile innocently at his mother. "I don't think Harry feels too good."

"Jeff, I could strangle you," she said, glaring at him as she rushed to where the blond boy was leaning weakly against a tree. She helped him wipe his mouth, then looked down at his pale face, her gray-green eyes softening in sympathy. "Do you feel better now, Harrison?"

"Yes, ma'am." He turned to look at the small cluster of boys standing on the trail. "Mrs. Fisher, don't be mad at Jeff. I don't mind if he teases me."

"How could you not mind?" she asked in bewilderment. "You throw up every time he does it."

"I throw up all the time anyway," he said reasonably. "And Jeff calls me Harry," he added, as though that explained everything.

"If you say so," she said doubtfully, wondering once again if she would ever understand boys. Her thirteen-year-old daughter's moods and motivations were clear to her—she could remember going through much the same thing herself—but boys were a whole different can of worms, she thought.

If Don were alive, perhaps he could have helped her delve into the intricacies of the male mind. But then again, probably not. As good a man as Don had been,

he still had believed children were to be fed and clothed and then ignored until they were old enough to make sense.

The subject was academic anyway, she decided with a shrug. She was on her own and would have to continue winging it as she had for the last three years. Hopefully, by the time Jeff figured out that his mother had no idea how to be a parent to a mysterious male, he would be too old to take advantage of the fact.

Smothering a groan as she picked up her backpack, she motioned the boys to continue their hike.

As she trudged grimly in the lead, Abby plotted the demise of one Harrison Woodall, Senior—friend, employer, and all-around fink.

She could see him now as he had sat in the living room of her small frame home, smiling benignly at her. "Going camping will be good for the boys," he'd said. "Get them back to nature for a couple of weekends a month. And it'll be especially good for Jeff. The fathers will take turns teaching them about the outdoor life," he'd added, then moved in for the kill. "Jeff needs more contact with men, Abby."

So where were those men now? she fumed. Suddenly they were all too busy to spare a weekend. And guess who got stuck with the job? The only person in nine counties who couldn't tell the difference between boxwood and hollyhock.

She reached up to push her golden brown hair back from her forehead. This was definitely not what she had envisioned for her summer vacation. For the three months school was out she had planned on doing her best to avoid anyone under the age of thirty.

She tried to keep the pace brisk and steady, but the last quarter mile to the lake seemed to take forever. As hard as she tried to force herself to be sensible, she couldn't get her mind off the radio report about those escaped prisoners. To make

matters worse, she was plagued by the eerie sensation of being watched.

A large, rough-looking man watched from the shadows as the small group continued walking toward the lake. He wondered if he should make his move now, while they were still in the thick woods. Then he thought of the commotion the five boys would make. No, now was not the time. A slow smile spread across his irregular features and his dark eyes began to take on a look of anticipation. He would wait until dark, until the boys were asleep.

When they finally reached the chosen spot—a small clearing on the east side of the lake—Abby set the boys to gathering dry wood. She used her lighter to get a medium-sized camp fire going just as the shadows began to surround them. After they roasted marshmallows and told ghost stories for what seemed like hours, she finally succeeded in herding the group into their sleeping bags.

Settling down on a nearby stump with her back to the fire, Abby sat listening silently as the excited whispers of the boys turned into the even breathing of sleep.

Friday is over, she thought with a sigh. Now if only she could make it through tomorrow with her life and sanity intact.

As she thought of the two days to come she shifted uneasily, some of her contentment dissolving. It seemed unbelievable that supposedly responsible parents should trust her with the safety of their children for a weekend in the wilds. Did being a high school English teacher and mother of two automatically qualify her as an outdoor expert?

Principal or no, Harrison was going to feel the sharp side of her tongue for this one. How was she going to fake her way through fishing and exploring and whatever other woodsy things they had planned for the next two days?

I need help, she moaned silently.

Then, as though some mischievous god

had heard her wordless plea, a shadow fell across the ground in front of her.

Abby jerked upright to free her feet for a hasty exit, then stood paralyzed as her shoulder was caught in a grip of iron.

"Abby! Are you deaf? Why didn't you answer me?"

She stared at the shadows the dying fire cast on the face of her attacker, then whispered hoarsely, "Joe?"

The face before her was not exactly one to inspire confidence on a dark night. His large, crooked nose had obviously been broken several times. And the effect of the scar that dipped down into one heavy eyebrow was in no way softened by his neatly trimmed, gray-flecked black hair. The tight Levi's and faded sweatshirt he wore might have looked casual on another man, but on Joe Gilbraith they merely served to emphasize the iron strength that had made him famous.

As she felt the adrenaline seep out of her system, Abby sank weakly back to her former position. "How long have you been here?" she asked shakily.

"I caught up with you on the trail about a half mile from the lake." He stared at her slowly narrowing eyes and added hastily, "Now don't get all huffy. I wasn't spying on you."

She took a deep breath, then said through clenched teeth, "You were there, watching us, giving me a nervous rash because I thought desperate criminals were following us? Why? Why didn't you just say 'Here I am'?" The boys would have been thrilled to death."

"Yes, I know." His soft reply went a long way toward cooling her heated blood. "Because I'm a big-shot football star. That's why."

"I don't understand."

"You're supposed to be in charge," he said simply. "If I had arrived earlier, it would have disrupted things completely."

Abby stared at him in confusion, then said slowly, "You were afraid you would undermine my authority with the boys?" At his confirming nod, she added in amazement, "You really are a nice person, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh. I am," he said, modestly bowing his head. Then he looked up and grinned. "I'm cute too,"

Laughing softly, she said, "So, why are you here? Surely you didn't come all the way out here just to scare me out of my wits?"

His laugh joined hers. "As a matter of fact I didn't. Harrison sent me to help you with the kids."

Abby stared straight ahead, absorbing the meaning of his quiet statement. "Oh, he did, did he? Now why do you suppose Harrison would do that, Joe?"

"Because he knows I like kids and he knew . . . thought you might need help," he explained, his voice puzzled. "Do you resent that? Would you rather go it alone?"

"Oh, no. I freely admit that I need help. I didn't want to be in charge of this little safari in the first place." She paused, throwing a calculating glance in his direction. "Tell me, Joe. In the month that you've been in town how many people have told you what a good cook I am and what a great personality I have and what a wonderful mother I am?"

"Good grief! You're right," he said. Abby had to stifle a giggle at the horror in his voice. "Have they been pulling the same thing on you?"

She nodded emphatically. "Oh, yes. I think I'll scream if I hear one more person tell me what a good catch you are. 'But Abby,' " she mimicked, "he's famous . . . and so nice. He'd make such a wonderful father for Jeff and Brennie. Just look at the work he's done with the Special Olympics. And in case I have a mercenary streak, they all tell me how well your Shrimp Shacks are doing."

He chuckled, then said reluctantly, "What are we going to do? Should I leave?"

"Oh, no. Don't you dare," she said hastily. "The boys were already beginning to see through my attempts to fake it. You'll just have to learn how to handle our well-meaning friends. I've been doing it for years."

"You mean they make a habit of match-making?"

"A habit?" she said dryly. "They make it their life's work. For some reason unmarried people make married people nervous. I've been a widow for three years, and for two and a half of those I've been dodging 'Have I got a man for you!' It was irritating at first, but I've learned to live with it."

"I don't see how you can treat it so lightly. It was a rotten trick for them to pull." His voice was disgruntled and more than a little annoyed.

"Sending you out here?"

"No, the matchmaking thing," he said heatedly. He stared up at the stars, then added, "I had"—he hesitated momentarily as though searching for the right word—"plans of my own."

"Plans?"

"Uh-huh," he confirmed, then swung his eyes back to her, giving her a swift, all-encompassing examination. "Plans."

"Oh, plans," she said in dawning comprehension, then shook her head in sympathy. "Put a cramp in your style, did they? Well, just to ease your mind, you picked the wrong target. I wouldn't have succumbed to your charm."

"Is that right?" he murmured, a purposeful strength entering his voice.

"Uh-oh. Now I've aroused your hunting instincts. I honestly didn't intend to challenge you."

He continued to stare at her, this time with a slightly puzzled expression. "You're very casual about the male-fe-

male thing, aren't you?"

"I could never see any reason for getting so intense about it," she said, shrugging. "When you spend nine months of the year watching hundreds of giggling Mata Haris vamping pubescent Don Juans and vice versa, it makes you want something more straightforward and less nerve-racking."

He gave her a slow, sensual smile. "As long as I know the rules, I'll try to stick to them."

"That's . . . admirable of you." She swallowed. "But since the game was called off, I don't think we need to worry about the rules."

"Oh?" His face came very close to hers. "No rules?"

"What I mean . . ." She gave a nervous little laugh. "I mean that the rules for friendship are different from the rules for—"

"A love affair?" he offered. "A seduction?"

She fell silent, momentarily distracted by the sexual tension that had suddenly begun to glow between them. "Seduction's a nasty word," she said finally. "Seduction implies that the woman is stupid—or weak—enough to be persuaded to do something she really doesn't want to do or that she knows is wrong." She shook her head emphatically. "No, I don't believe in that word. If an adult female makes love with a man, it's because she wants to . . . even if she won't admit it to herself."

"It's an interesting hypothesis," he said softly. "We could"—he ran a single finger up the line of her calf to her bare thigh—"put it to the test."

"Oh, Lord," she whispered with comic, but very real, alarm. "You've turned it on full force now, haven't you? I thought you'd decided the busybodies of Bardle had put a monkey wrench into your amorous plans?"

"I changed my mind. It could add a whole new dimension to the game. Don't you realize that practically everything you've said tonight has only intrigued me more?"

"Don't be intrigued," she said helplessly. "Whatever I said, I take it all back."

"Too late. You said you can't see anything to get so intense about—which makes me very much want to show you just how much there really is to get intense about. The fact that the whole town will be watching avidly will merely be a test of my ingenuity."

She gave a startled laugh, then said, "I think it's at this point that I'm supposed to play the outraged female and say something trite and totally meaningless like 'How dare you' or 'Of all the nerve'."

"Yes," he agreed softly. "And I wonder why you're not . . ."

He wasn't the only one who was wondering, she admitted silently, as she said a brisk goodnight and crawled inside her sleeping bag moments later.

Now why wasn't I spitting mad when he made that outrageous announcement? she wondered. What kind of emotional stage was she going through that would allow her to calmly accept Joe's declaration of his intention to stalk her as though she were a trophy elk? Maybe, just maybe, she was more than a little intrigued herself.

Intrigued and flattered. Though she would certainly never have admitted it to Joe. Nor would she admit that at her first meeting with him a month earlier, she had found herself very much attracted to this strangely magnetic man. Something had happened that first night that she didn't understand. An unfamiliar emotion had grown inside her, an emotion that made her just a little uneasy.

She'd tried to keep in mind that, until recently, he had been seen by millions every Monday night during the football sea-

son in his job as commentator. She'd tried to convince herself that she was feeling the same fascination any average person would feel upon meeting a celebrity.

But somehow it had seemed like more than that and, just to be on the safe side, she had carefully ignored the attraction.

Secretly, of course, she was just as excited about having the retired quarterback in their small town as everyone else. There was apparently some sort of tie between Harrison and Joe, since Joe was here at her employer's request. For one school year only. And in that time, he had promised, he'd produce a winning football team.

Abby rolled over in her bag and smothered a chuckle as she thought of the famous Joe Gilbraith coaching a team with a thirteen-year losing streak behind them.

Joe had said he could change that. He hadn't been boasting when he had made the statement, but had exuded a quiet self-assurance that was much more believable.

That same self-confidence had been there when he'd talked of pursuing her.

Not that she would consider an affair. Considering Abby's position in the small town, it was very fortunate that she had adjusted so well to doing without sex.

After Don's death, remaining strong for Jeff and Brennie's sake had postponed Abby's own bout with grief, but when she had finally managed to get over the shock and the dreadful sense of loss, she had found to her surprise that she could adjust quite well to being single. She was a healthy woman with healthy appetites, but fortunately those appetites seemed to have vanished at some point after her husband's death.

She certainly didn't need the complication of Joe Gilbraith—battered, world-weary, reeking of blatant, masculine sensuality—in her life. But, world-weary or not, being pursued by a man as attractive and intelligent as Joe promised to make

this one of her more memorable summers.

Joe folded his hands behind his head and listened to Abby shifting restlessly in her sleeping bag. What a surprise and joy she was, he thought. The moment he had seen her a month ago he had sensed that she was different.

When she had walked into the welcome party given for him by Harrison, the whole room had seemed to come to life. As she'd made her way across the room, she was stopped by each group she encountered on the way. It had taken her half an hour to traverse the room. And half an hour of watching her was all he had needed to become thoroughly entranced.

Everyone else in the small town treated Joe like a celebrity. But not Abby. She had treated him like an ordinary human being at that very first meeting. That, and the fact that she had the most gorgeous pair of legs he had ever seen, had made him decide with an uncharacteristic lack of caution that he would get to know her—and her legs—much better before the summer was over.

Of course, he thought, rolling over on his side, the fact that the small community would be watching his every move might slow down his progress. But Joe was definitely not a man to let a few stumbling blocks get in the way of what he wanted.

He had come to Bardle to make his peace with the past—old debts, old memories. But in the meantime he had been presented with all the makings of a very interesting summer and he intended to take full advantage of them.

"Joe, who messed up your leg like that? I bet you didn't let 'em get away with it. I bet you trashed 'em good for hitting you so hard."

The next afternoon Abby glanced up from the crisply fried fish on her plate to give her son a threatening look. When

would he ever learn proper manners?

She threw Joe an apologetic glance.

"No, it's all right, Abby." He chuckled, then looked down at the boys, who were elbowing and shoving each other to sit as close to him as possible. "It wasn't just one person who did this." He indicated the scars on his left leg. "I have the history of my ten years in football carved into my body. Take this one." He pointed to a long, thin scar and rubbed it. "I got this one from an operation I had after a Super Bowl game. You remember the one I'm talking about?"

And with those few words he had them in the palm of his hand. As he gave them a blow-by-blow account of his injuries, the group sat openmouthed and silent.

Later, after he asked the boys to clean up the campsite before they went for a hike, Joe turned to Abby and said softly, "The scars . . . they don't bother you, do they?"

She stared at him in confusion. "Bother me? Why on earth should they bother me?"

"They're not exactly beautiful."

She studied his legs for a moment. "No, they're not beautiful, but unless you were considering a career as a Rockette, I can't see that it's all that important."

He laughed and sat back, brushing the scars lightly with his callused fingers. Abby clasped her hands tightly around her knees, for suddenly, out of nowhere, came the urge to reach out and touch him herself.

Before the strange new sensations could overwhelm her, however, the boys surrounded them, demanding that they begin their hike.

Time after time during the day she blessed Joe's presence. He had patience with children that she'd very rarely seen in bachelors; more, he treated them as individuals. When they spoke he actually listened to what they were saying.

That night, when the boys had finally settled down without benefit of scary tales thanks to Joe's filling in with old football stories, Abby sat with him in the soft light of the camp fire.

"How long have you been teaching?" Joe's deep, quiet voice interrupted her wandering thoughts.

"Only since Don's death." She shifted to escape a root that was digging into her hip. "We were married right after high school, so I didn't get the chance to go to college. But when I hit that crazy period most women go through at thirty, I decided I would 'find' myself and get my degree. I had only just graduated when Don had his heart attack."

"And did you? Find yourself, I mean?"

She leaned her head back against a stump and considered the question. "I don't know. Do you suppose anyone ever realizes it when it happens?"

"Maybe the problem is that no one ever really finds himself," he said quietly. "We're all constantly changing, constantly growing, so the me of today isn't necessarily the me of tomorrow."

Abby listened thoughtfully, then said, "And then maybe sometimes you are one thing in one set of circumstances and something different in another."

Abby knew that theory could apply to herself. When Don was alive she was happy just being his wife and mother to his children. If Don had lived she would most likely have been content to spend the rest of her life in that role. But he hadn't lived, and when she was forced to make a new life for herself and her children, she'd found the challenge of her new role as wage earner and single parent exciting and surprisingly rewarding.

Raising her eyes, she found Joe watching her closely with a curiously reflective look in his deep brown eyes.

"Did you ever date any of those men the matchmakers pushed?" he asked.

"A couple in the beginning," she said. "But eventually I decided I'm too selfish to get involved with anyone."

"Selfish?"

She sighed, remembering. "I spent a lot of years compromising. At the time I didn't know that's what I was doing so it didn't bother me. But now I do, and I don't want to compromise anymore. I want to live the way I want to live, without explaining myself or apologizing because it's different from what someone else believes is right."

"And you think getting involved precludes leading your own life?"

"I mean emotionally involved. I suppose it's possible for some people to sustain a physical relationship without the emotional entanglement . . . but not for me."

"Are you saying you have to be in love before you make love?"

"Actually, that wasn't what I meant to say. I really don't know about that because I've never tried it. It's possible that I could enjoy a casual encounter very much . . . at the time. It's what happens afterward that I'm talking about."

"Afterward?"

"The guilt." She sighed in resignation. "In the spectrum of emotions, there is not one that I'm more familiar with. I've felt enough of it to last a lifetime. I refuse to take on any more."

"What have you done to feel so guilty about?" He sounded amused by her statement.

"Logically, I can say 'nothing.' But logic doesn't help when a person has guilt in her genes. I don't know what causes it. Pressure from my parents to be perfect . . . insecurity . . . it doesn't matter. What matters is that I've learned to avoid things I know are going to make me feel guilty. And, given my background and situation, casual sex is guaranteed to bring on a whopper of a guilt trip."

He stared at her for a moment, then smiled slowly. "I think that I have finally found an adversary worthy of my skill."

"I beg your pardon?"

He laughed. "That whole speech was perfect. After all that honesty, what kind of lowlife would persist in trying to make you give in? You never once said that I wouldn't succeed in getting you into bed. You've already said that if a woman sleeps with a man, it's because she wants to . . . thereby relieving me of all blame. But—now comes the clincher—if I succeeded, I would be leaving you to cope with a huge load of guilt."

He laughed again and shook his head. "It was beautiful. I couldn't have done better if I'd worked on that argument for a year!"

She stared at him in amazement. He didn't believe her. He thought it was all a part of the game.

"Thank you . . . I think. But how good a move was it if you don't believe me?"

"It stopped me for a while," he allowed generously. "And it warned me to be on my toes. I'll have to spend a lot more time on my strategy than I had planned. Of course," he continued, "that makes the whole thing all the more interesting."

Later that night, as Abby lay awake staring at the starry sky, she felt the stirring of unfamiliar sensations throughout her body—an aching restlessness that was outside her range of experience. She moved fitfully, wondering how she was going to survive the effects of this bout, much less the next.

"We're late," Abby muttered on Sunday afternoon, then looked up distractedly from the tangle of clothes in Jeff's suitcase to find her daughter still in the hall, still on the telephone. "Brennie, I told Nonnie and Pop we would be there by three-thirty. That means we have to leave in exactly five minutes."

Turning back to Jeff's suitcase, she sighed in resignation. It was hopeless. She could either use dynamite or let it go the way it was . . . and she had no time to hunt down explosives. The kids were going to spend the next month with her parents at their farm. The prospect of being on her own both scared and thrilled Abby.

With a crooked smile, she recalled her parting from Joe the day before. He had handled the chaos of breaking camp with the ease of a born leader.

When they were ready to leave, she had been strangely on edge, as though she were waiting for something. But as she'd pulled her station wagon away, not one word of challenge had crossed his lips. She didn't exactly know what she had expected—a whispered word, an intimate glance—anything other than a companionable silence. Finally, the truth had occurred to her. This was part of the game. Joe was keeping her guessing to intrigue her, to keep her mind on him exclusively.

"And doing a damn fine job of it," she admitted ruefully an hour later, as she dodged holes in the dirt road that led to her parents' farm. Since the weekend, she was suddenly feeling totally different about herself as a woman. Suddenly it wasn't enough to be the Widow Fisher, schoolteacher, and mother to Jeff and Brennie. Suddenly she felt as though there might be more to this person, Abigail Fisher, than she had ever suspected.

As her parents' home appeared around the next corner, she shook away the thought. Abby was not one to dwell on fairy tales. And dreams of a prince who would kiss her awake—dreams of Joe—were simply not practical.

She pulled the station wagon into the gravel driveway and, as she stepped from the car, she slipped back into the comfortable, familiar role of much-loved and still-indulged only daughter.

It was only as she was leaving several

hours later that Abby's own daughter brought the puzzle of her relationship with Joe back into her thoughts.

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" Brennie stared down at her mother through the open car window. "You've never been on your own for a whole month before. What will you do?"

"For a start, I'll sit and listen to the quiet." She paused thoughtfully. "Then maybe I'll just hang around and watch the house stay clean."

She started to say something more to reassure her daughter, but already Brennie's thoughts were turning to her grandparents and the pig that had been designated hers for their stay.

I'm forgotten already, she thought with a rueful smile. But Abby didn't really mind. She knew it was healthy. Her children would be very well occupied for the next month.

But would she? Abby wondered. Brennie was right. This was the first time in her life that she had been truly alone for more than a few days at a time. Suddenly she was nothing more than Abigail Fisher. Not mother; not daughter, only woman.

Woman. Somehow over the last few years she had forgotten that before all her other roles she was a woman. It was strange that only now did the fact stand out. Was it Joe who had brought it home to her?

"I'm a woman. He's a man," she said, testing the words aloud. It sounded very simple on the surface, but Abby knew it wasn't. Joe had roles too. And his didn't stop at just being a man, even though he was very much a man.

So much a man, she thought wryly, that each time she picked up a gossip newspaper she saw a picture of him with a different woman. Women were his life's work, according to the media.

But then there was the way he had been with the boys over the weekend, she

mused. Hardly the behavior of a playboy.

But playboy or not, he was still the most exciting man she had ever met, Abby thought with a smile as she turned her full concentration to the road ahead of her.

When she walked into the house an hour later, she stood for a moment listening. So this was what silence sounded like, she thought, raising her brows in wonder.

As much as she loved her children, she felt free, really free, for the first time in years. She could do anything she wanted to do. She began to laugh lightheadedly. Then she turned toward the door at the sound of the doorbell.

As she opened it, her eyes widened in surprise. Joe stood on the porch.

"Your weather stripping is loose," he said as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. The sound echoed loudly in the empty house. This was something she hadn't thought about. Always before when they'd met, they had been surrounded by people. She hadn't realized how much that had affected his behavior. And her reaction to him.

"I heard that Jeff and Brennie were staying with your parents and I just wanted to make sure you weren't . . ." He paused and the smile widened, ". . . lonely."

His words were oh, so casual, but the look in his eyes was anything but. Abby slowly backed away.

"Lonely?" She gave a breathless laugh. "They just left and I've got a three-page list of 'Things To Do While The Kids Are Gone'." Every backward step she took was matched by an equal step forward from Joe.

"Such as?"

How could two words sound so provocative . . . so suggestive? "I've got a dozen best-sellers that I've saved to read while they're gone and—and other things like . . ." She searched for something, any-

thing, to say.

"Like?" He moved a step closer.

"The weather stripping!" she said in a relieved gust. "I need to—oh!" Abby stopped speaking abruptly as her back connected with the wall.

Raising one hand to the wall beside her, Joe leaned closer.

"You need to . . . what?" he murmured, stirring the fine hair on her forehead.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she gasped, "Replace it."

"I've heard"—he leaned even closer and she felt the warmth of his breath against her ear—"that replacing weather stripping can be hard work. Maybe we should go out to eat first, so you'll have enough energy for . . ." he paused, ". . . weather stripping."

"Actually," she gasped, "I hadn't planned on leaving the house tonight."

"That might work out better," he said, lowering his head the fraction of an inch it took to find her lips.

Keep cool and calm. Fight the feeling, her brain urged bracingly.

Mind, your own business, her body countered as it moved deeper into his embrace.

The sighing moan that accompanied her momentary surrender had barely left her lips when she heard a knock on her front door. The sound effectively accomplished what she hadn't been able to do alone. Drawing a shaky breath, she pulled away. "You almost had me that time," she admitted as she turned and walked quickly across the room.

"Judy," she said warily, opening the door a couple of inches and placing her body in the opening to block her friend's view of the room.

But her hesitation went unnoticed by Harrison's energetic wife. The blond locomotive pushed her way in.

"Abby, I just wanted to tell you—oh, hello, Joe." She turned to give Abby a sly

look. "How nice to see you here."

Abby shot Joe a look of exasperated apology. "Judy, what did you want to tell me?"

Her friend's eyes brightened as she remembered. "This is perfect! I wanted to ask you to come to our barbecue tonight—it's a last-minute thing. Now you can both come. Everyone—"

"We can't! We're going—"

"We have reservations—"

Joe and Abby spoke simultaneously with great haste, then stopped abruptly.

"That's a shame," Judy said in disappointment; then her eyes brightened as she added, "As long as I'm here I can talk to Joe while you get dressed, Abby. Have I told you that Abby started teaching Sunday school when she was only fourteen? Everyone—"

Judy's reminiscence was cut off sharply when Abby jerked her in the direction of the bedroom. "Help me dress, Judy," Abby said grimly.

"Really, Abby," Judy protested as the bedroom door closed behind them, "you've been dressing yourself for years. Why do you suddenly need my help?"

"I don't. But I also don't need you to sell me to Joe." She walked to the closet and pulled out a sky blue silk sheath. Stripping quickly she pulled on the sheath, then walked to the mirror and stared at the deep V neck that exposed a good portion of her full breasts.

After what had just happened in the living room, Abby felt she should be changing into something with long sleeves and a high neck . . . perhaps in mud brown. Then a determined light began to grow in her eyes. She wouldn't be so cowardly, she decided. She would play the game with panache, throwing him as many curves as he threw her.

It took a while for her to put on makeup and give her hair a good brushing, but twenty minutes later she was ready.

It took another five minutes for Judy to say good-bye to Joe, but finally Abby closed the door behind her meddlesome but thoroughly delightful friend. Then she turned to confront the dark eyes that had been burning into her since she had reentered the living room.

Joe watched Abby complete her slow turn. "Going somewhere?" he asked, trying to keep the laughter out of his voice.

"Me?" she scoffed weakly. "Of course. We're going out . . . remember?"

He looked at her in surprise. "You're really going out with me?"

"I've explained all this to you," she said, a gleam of amusement beginning to grow in her eyes. "How many people do you think will be watching when we walk out that door? I've already told Judy I'm going out with you."

She glanced down at her watch. "She's been gone about two minutes so she's had enough time to inform all of Bardle by now. If I don't leave with you, they'll be over here en masse to find out why."

With comic haste, Joe led her out the door.

"Tonight," he said, once they were settled in the car, "I'm going to teach you how to have fun."

"You make me sound very dull," she said. "I know how to have fun."

"I'm not talking about secondhand fun—through your kids or your students or your neighbors. I'm going to teach you to have fun for Abby's sake." Before she could voice a protest, he continued. "As nice as it is, you happen to live in a very limiting environment. In Bardle you're seen as a teacher, a widow, and a mother. You live up to the restrictions other people put on you."

She shook her head. "My friends don't limit me. They all want only the best for me."

"Yes, you're right," he admitted. "But it's the best as they see it. You're locked

into a role that's taken a lifetime to develop. If you decided to live a different lifestyle, they would accept it because they love you. It's you who would have trouble breaking the mold, not them."

Abby didn't comment. She was perfectly willing to let him lead tonight. It wouldn't hurt to try his new world for a while. She knew it wouldn't work when Jeff and Brennie came home and when school began again. But for right now, why not?

Joe pulled into the crowded parking lot of a small place that Abby had only read about in the "People" section of the Sunday papers. It was a place out of a dream she thought as they entered and a waiter sat them at a secluded table and gave them menus.

In the flickering candlelight Abby studied Joe intently while he gave their orders to the waiter. He didn't seem at all out of place. It made her wonder about his background.

When he'd handed back the menus, she asked, "What brings a sophisticated man like you to a backwater town like Bardle?"

He smiled. "Harrison," he said, "and an old debt that goes all the way back to Brooklyn."

"Brooklyn?" she echoed in surprise. "But Harrison left Brooklyn right after high school, didn't he?"

He nodded. "Twenty-two years ago. We were both born and raised in Brooklyn. Did you know his father was a high school coach?" he asked before she could comment.

She shook her head, then asked hesitantly, "Does Harrison's father have something to do with the debt you owe him?"

He nodded slowly, then smiled a crooked, slightly sad smile. "I guess you could say I had problems when I was younger. I had a giant hate going back then, Abby. A hate that I thought included the whole

world. When I was six my mother left. Just walked out without a word. My father . . . my father was not a loving person. What the hell—there's no nice way to say it. He abused me."

She sucked in a sharp, shocked breath.

When he heard her indrawn breath, he shook his head and smiled. "Don't let it upset you. It was a long time ago. Actually, it was only occasionally physical abuse; more often it was mental. He would tell me over and over how worthless I was.

"I could never understand what I had done. For a long time I was sure it was my fault my mother had left. I felt guilty about all my childhood sins. Being too loud. Getting my new shoes muddy. I figured that was why he hated me.

"Some people react to that kind of situation by crawling into a protective shell. But not me. I was the biggest hell-raiser you've ever seen. There wasn't a teacher in grade school who could handle me. By the time I was eleven I had already been in reform school for habitual truancy."

Abby gasped. "Can they do that? I thought you had to commit a crime or something."

"Not if your parents agree to it, and my father agreed. It's probably a good thing it happened." He grinned suddenly. "I may have been wild, but I wasn't stupid. It was . . . it was not a nice place, so after that I went to school every day—religiously."

She smiled at the wicked gleam in his eyes, concentrating fiercely on his words because she didn't want to think about the strange feeling that was overtaking her. The feeling that nothing in her life would ever be the same again.

"I met Harrison in high school," he went on. "Lord, I was a pain in the ass back then, so contemptuous of the fact that his father was the football coach. I thought those pampered all-American jocks at school were a bunch of sissies. I

admit now that I was jealous. Jealous of the normalcy of their lives. But back then I thought I was cool. For some crazy reason Harrison decided he wanted to be my friend.

"He was the one who convinced me to try out for the team . . . and convinced his father to give me a chance. I told myself I was doing it just to show those mama's boys how a real man plays football, but secretly I wanted so badly to be a part of that world."

He laughed softly. "The first time I went out on the field those 'mama's boys' creamed me. And that made me all the more determined to prove myself. That's how it all started. Later there was a football scholarship. And even later came the realization that I had never hated anyone . . . except maybe myself. Damn," he continued with quiet emphasis. "I haven't talked about that in years. And here I was wanting to impress you with what a suave character I am."

"I'm impressed," she said slowly. "Take my word for it."

Suddenly the waiter appeared beside them with their first course and the serious mood that had held them both disappeared. They ate in companionable silence, listening to the veteran singer who performed with only a piano for accompaniment.

After dinner, Joe took Abby to a nightclub. For a few minutes she was lost amid the music and loud voices and smoke, but before she could catch her breath, Joe had her out on the dance floor, where she felt breathless changes taking place inside her. It was as though some part of her that had been overlooked for years was beginning to struggle for freedom.

She and Joe danced without pause for the next two hours. Then they quickly traded the noisy club for a small nearby pub with a distinctly Irish flavor.

Abby sat beside Joe and talked with the

pub regulars about Ireland and horse racing and jazz. It was an exhilarating experience for Abby. She was used to conversing either with children or adults who, though wonderful people, didn't think about much beyond the town boundaries of Bardle.

When they left the pub at last, it was two in the morning. Abby felt relaxed and happy as she sat close to Joe in the car, softly singing "Sweet Molly Malone."

"So what did you think of my world?" he asked as he pulled up in front of her house.

She leaned her head back against the seat, turning slightly to look at him. "It was wonderful . . . a little like Disneyland for grown-ups."

"Disneyland," he echoed thoughtfully. "As in fantasy or something not quite real?"

"You have to admit that it's just a place to visit. It's exactly what I needed for my first vacation alone and I thank you. But . . ."

"But?"

"But when the kids come home, my life will return to normal and it will all be a very pleasant memory."

Joe winced inside. He was included in the things that would be relegated to memory. She didn't say it, perhaps didn't even consciously recognize it herself. But he knew it as certainly as he knew he wasn't going to settle for a vague spot in the back of her mind without a fight.

As he bent to meet her waiting lips, she eagerly lifted her hands to his face, wanting to hold the kiss forever. Her touch brought an electricity to the air around them and he let his head fall to her breasts.

Suddenly he gave a rough, breathless laugh. "And I was going to seduce you?" he whispered huskily. "You seduce me with every touch."

Abby placed her hands on either side of his head and pressed him closer. She low-

ered her hands and released a button on his shirt, in order to slide her hand inside next to his skin.

His groan of pleasure shook her visibly and she whispered through dry, hot lips, "I was right about not being seduced . . . because I know exactly what I'm doing . . . and why I'm doing it. I'm doing it because I want to. Because I can't not touch you."

He made a sound that was painful to hear and his lips met hers in a fiery kiss. In the next few minutes a delicious heat surrounded them in waves as their bodies moved desperately against each other.

"Joe," she said, the word taking the form of a gasp for breath. "Oh Lord, Joe. This is too much. Too much, too fast. I'm in over my head. I really, really am."

Taking her face in his hands, he held her an inch away and stared into her eyes. "You really, really are?" he repeated huskily. After a moment his lips twisted in a wry smile. "Yes, I guess you are."

They adjusted their clothes and he slid out of the car, silently bending down to help her out. Words didn't seem to be necessary now. She knew he would kiss her again, but she also knew he wouldn't press for more. It was as though the end of the evening had been planned between them down to its most minute detail.

She stepped from the car into the warm, seductive night air. But as she reached the sidewalk, the unspoken plan went sadly awry. An unseen demon entered her legs, causing her knees to buckle slightly.

She lurched sideways just enough to collide with Billy Don Bosier's wagon. Four-year-old Billy Don was the terror of the neighborhood, and his wagon contained the tools of his trade, an assortment of battered pots and pans in which to carry sand and bugs and to beat on when the street became too peaceful.

Suddenly the whole street came alive. Mere seconds after the quiet had been bro-

ken by the sound of the crashing utensils, dogs began to bark, porch lights flashed on, and curtains were pulled back, and neighbors peered out the windows.

For a moment Abby and Joe stood frozen to the sidewalk in shock. Then Joe raised his eyes to the canopy of stars. "Not now. Please not now," he muttered in comically helpless frustration.

Abby felt hysteria rising in her. Then, unable to stop herself, she began to laugh silently, smothering the sound behind both hands.

As the dogs from the next street joined the raucous chorus, Joe began to chuckle, reluctantly at first, as though he couldn't help it, then in a mighty rumble that joined the other sounds.

"Abby, Abby," he said weakly when his laughter finally subsided, "Let's run away from home."

She laughed. "I don't think that would work. But maybe we could find a way to escape that's a little less drastic." Suddenly a thought occurred to her and her eyes brightened perceptibly. "Why didn't I think of it before? Tomorrow's First Monday."

"Tomorrow's Saturday," he said, eyeing her doubtfully.

"First Monday begins on Friday," she explained over her shoulder as she stepped up on the porch.

He took hold of her shoulders and turned her toward him. "Explain. What exactly is First Monday?"

"In Canton—a town to the east of here—they used to have a trade day on the first Monday of each month. Only it became so popular, they expanded it to include the weekend before. It's a giant flea market and carnival combined. I haven't been there in years."

"It sounds wonderful," he said with overdone enthusiasm.

"Well, maybe not wonderful," she said carefully, "but different anyway." She

smiled up at him as she opened her front door. "You showed me how to have fun in your world; now it's my turn to show you how we do it in mine."

Joe arrived at Abby's front door the next day, feeling a little like he had as a kid when he had played hooky from school. When she opened the front door and stepped out, his eyes ran slowly over the long, tanned legs that her white shorts set off perfectly.

He started to pull the door closed behind her, but didn't quite manage to do it before a golden brown ball of fur flew through the small opening. Before he could do more than blink, the dog had bounded down the walk and jumped through the open window into the backseat of the car.

"Merry," Abby said in exasperation as she walked to the car. "Get out."

Joe lifted the dog out of the car and started back toward the house, but the squirming animal was impossible to hold. Seconds later he watch helplessly as Merry ran through his legs and took his place in the backseat again.

Joe smiled wryly, glancing down at Abby. "As I was saying, what we really need on this trip is a dog."

She shrugged in wary resignation. "You'll be sorry," she said.

Abby was still throwing menacing looks at the happy animal in the backseat when they turned onto the back road that would take them to I-20 and then to Canton.

The small town of Canton lay an hour east of Dallas and about ten miles south of the interstate highway, on the edge of the piney woods. On the weekends of First Monday people came by the thousands from all over to wander through the multitude of booths and tents.

Joe and Abby wandered by hundreds of booths. They stopped to hear guitars and

portable organs demonstrated, and to examine dolls with exquisite porcelain faces and handmade clothing, marveling over junk and antiques alike. They agreed that their favorite booth was the one that displayed beautifully stitched handmade quilts. Abby could have stayed for hours, but eventually Merry insisted they move on.

Joe glanced at Abby. Did she know? he wondered. Could she tell he felt on the outside looking in? He loved her world, the easygoing, friendly attitude of the people he met. But he wasn't a part of it. He was only a visitor, an outsider.

All his life he had felt different from the rest of the world, different from "normal" people, and that difference was a line he couldn't seem to cross.

Even when he had been on top in football, the estrangement had been there. People had fought to be his "friends," but only because he was a celebrity. He felt that up until the time he'd come to Bardle, Harrison had been the only one who saw him as a real person.

Now there was Abby. Sometimes he felt that if he ever decided to show her just how much she meant to him, he would scare her off. He wanted so desperately to be a part of her world, a real part. The only problem was, he didn't quite know how to accomplish that. He couldn't just barge in and say "here I am," he thought. She had to invite him in.

Suddenly he laughed, putting his thoughtful mood aside as he saw Merry do a quick U-turn toward a hot dog stand. Food was everywhere and the smell was irresistible, to them as well as to the dog.

Heroically they tried steak sandwiches piled high with sauteed onions, and for dessert, frozen pureed fruit on a stick. Then, carrying huge, sun-ripened peaches, they wandered away from the crowded fairgrounds, running hand in hand up a small hill. Laughing and out of breath,

they sat under a huge oak at the top, where the raucous country music drifted up to them along with the summer breeze.

While Merry curled up to take a nap, Abby leaned against the tree and watched Joe finish his peach with greedy relish.

"I wonder," she said lazily, "if you know how much you're admired by the people in Bardle . . . especially now that people have gotten to know you."

He gave her an odd glance. "That's flattering, but I'm really just an ordinary man who happened to fall into a job where I was highly visible."

"Ordinary?" she said skeptically. "What about your work with the Special Olympics?" She paused thoughtfully. "Did you get involved with those kids because of your background? Because you considered yourself handicapped?"

He shrugged. "That could have been part of it, but it was really just one of those things that sneak up on you before you know it.

"I was watching television one Sunday. Just passing the time until the football game came on. The station was showing some clips from a local Special Olympics. You've probably seen clips like it. All those kids . . ." His voice trailed away. Then he cleared his throat and continued. "It wasn't long before I forgot all about the football game. I was totally involved with those kids. Anyway, after several events they had a sprint race.

"When the race started, the camera concentrated mostly on the kids in front. Then suddenly it panned behind those kids and there was a boy in a wheelchair, slowly wheeling his chair down the track. He—" Joe stopped to inhale slowly. "Abby, he couldn't even hold his head up-right.

"Well," he said in a gust, "the race didn't last long. The winner and runners-up were congratulating each other and being hugged by friends. Then the camera

cut back and the boy in the wheelchair was still on the track . . . slowly moving those wheels. About then the crowd started clapping in time, urging him on. I found myself beating my fists on the arms of my chair. People were standing up, hanging over the rails, screaming encouragement." He paused to take a deep breath. "And dammit, Abby, he made it. He pushed that metal obscenity over the finish line and the crowd went wild . . . and so did I. I sat there with both fists raised in victory, crying like a baby. I felt drained, as though I'd been pushing that damn chair myself." He stared up at her. "But you know, there was no pity. Those kids didn't deserve my pity. Only admiration and pride. I couldn't watch that kind of courage and not be a part of it," he finished simply.

Abby sat perfectly still for a long time, letting waves of emotion wash over her. She knew there were tears on her face, but she didn't care.

It was a special moment, one she knew she would remember for the rest of her life. And, although Abby didn't recognize it yet, she had finally let Joe in.

They stayed as they were until late afternoon, then silently stood and walked back to the car.

The road they took to get back to I-20 wound through miles and miles of woods. Abby leaned against Joe, content just to watch the passing scenery.

Merry had been asleep since they left Canton, but suddenly he began to whine and scratch frantically on the back door.

"Oh dear," Abby murmured warily. "Joe, I think you'd better pull over. That scratching is awfully familiar."

When he stopped the car, Abby attached the leash to Merry's collar and stepped out.

"Isn't nature wonderful?" Joe said, laughing as he walked beside her.

"Sure," she said dryly, then, as the dog

sniffed at another tree and passed it by, "Merry, for heaven's sake, don't be so picky."

Suddenly the leash was jerked from her hand and Merry disappeared into the woods.

"Merry!" she called in exasperation, then started to move in the direction the dog had taken.

"Shouldn't we wait here for him?" Joe asked, catching her arm as she went past him.

"You don't know Merry," Abby said. "And you don't know the guilt a ten-year-old boy can lay on you with one look. If I lose Merry, I might as well look for a new home."

Suddenly she caught a glimpse of a white, wagging tail. "There he is!" she cried as she took off after him.

"Abby," Joe called as he followed her. "I really don't think this is a good idea."

Fifteen minutes later she was forced to agree with Joe. The playful dog was letting them see him just often enough to keep the chase going. When he disappeared again, Abby leaned against a tree to catch her breath, cursing softly.

Joe stood beside her, looking around at the solid wall of trees. "I'm sure glad you know this place, because I have no idea where we are. You do know this place, don't you?"

"Actually . . ." she said hesitantly.

"You mean we're lost?" For a moment she thought he was going to explode. Then he began to laugh. "I never knew country life could be so exciting."

Suddenly Merry appeared beside them, his tongue lolling, his tail wagging in contentment. Abby looked down at him with venom in her eyes.

"Now what?" Joe asked, his voice sounding strange as his body shook with laughter.

"Well, laughing certainly isn't going to accomplish anything," she said, throwing

him a disgruntled look. But she gave him a sheepish smile when he hugged her to him. "Oh, Joe. What are we going to do? It's beginning to get dark."

"Look, we headed west when we left the car, so if we keep what's left of the sun behind us, we should eventually come to the road."

Reaching down to get the end of Merry's leash, he began to lead them in an easterly direction. Twilight seemed to fall very quickly, and just when she felt things couldn't get worse, Abby felt a drop of rain on her cheek. She heard Joe's muttered curse, then suddenly a surprised exclamation.

"What is it?"

"I don't know," he said. "Some kind of structure." He glanced down at her. "Abby, I think we'd better check it out . . . just in case."

"You think we may have to spend the night here?"

"I'm afraid so, love. The rain is beginning to come down harder. Come on, let's see what it is."

The structure he had spotted had been a cabin once upon a time. Now it was nothing more than a pile of boards that seemed to be held together only by the sheer willpower of the lumber.

"It looks like a place where bats hold their conventions," Abby said warily, eyeing the disreputable-looking place.

"It's not exactly the Ritz, but it will keep the wolves off us," Joe said as he led her inside.

He was right, she thought. It wasn't the Ritz. But somehow he managed to light a fire in the ancient fireplace and pull a lumpy old mattress before it.

Merry needed no further invitation. He briskly shook the water off his coat, curled up on the hearth, and fell asleep.

Abby sat down on the mattress and moved close to the fire. She shivered until the warmth began to penetrate her damp

clothing, while Joe poked around in the dusty cabin.

Suddenly a look of amazement crossed his features.

"Abby," he said excitedly. "We're alone!"

She stared at him for a moment. "Yes," she said slowly. "We're alone."

He laughed, shaking his head. "You don't understand. For the first time since I've known you there is absolutely no possibility that we could be interrupted. No neighbors will peer out of their windows. No friends will check to see how we're getting along. I feel like doing something really wild."

"Like what?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Oh, I don't know. Something completely reckless, something I couldn't do in Bardle."

"You want to write dirty words on the walls?"

He laughed, then plopped down beside her and pulled her into his arms. "Abby," he said slowly, staring down at her startled face, "I'm going to kiss you. I'm going to kiss you to within an inch of your life, the way I've been wanting to for weeks."

"Joe, this is not the old follow-the-dog-into-the-woods-and-get-her-lost trick, is it?" she asked warily. "Because if it is, I refuse—"

Her protest was stopped by his descending mouth and, after the first surprised moment, she completely forgot about protesting and slid into the unbelievable pleasure of his kiss.

As she felt a fiery ache growing in her loins, Abby understood at last what had been happening to her. She had wanted Joe, wanted him desperately for a long time, but had managed to hide her need even from herself.

Her feverish movement against him was a conscious cry for more. And as he touched her with his hands, his mouth,

Abby felt she would never be whole, never be a complete woman, until she was truly his.

With his hand cupping her breast, he lowered his lips into the opening of her blouse, straining to touch as much of her warm flesh as he could.

He raised his head to look down at her. "You understand, don't you?" he whispered. "It's not a game anymore. It hasn't been for a long time."

Abby reached up to pull his mouth back to hers.

This was the moment Abby had dreamed of so often. It was a moment she had almost feared, but now, faced with the reality, there was no hesitation in her.

"Please," she whispered softly. Releasing her hold on his neck, she moved her hand to unbutton the first button on his shirt.

The primitive flame that leaped into his dark eyes burned into her. It scorched her body at the core of her desire. It scorched her heart. And as they slowly undressed each other, it burned wildly out of control until each breath seared her nostrils and her throat.

At last she was free to touch every inch of him. She lovingly explored each of the scars that marked his years in football. His heated flesh felt wonderfully vibrant under her caressing fingers, her wandering lips. And when she buried her face in his neck, a groan of pleasure escaped him, making her wild with desire.

She ached for him and at that moment she felt she would do anything for the love of him. She felt faint with the intensity of the sensations she was experiencing as he branded her body with his greedy hands, his insatiable mouth.

When he entered her at last, she arched to meet him eagerly. It was the fulfillment of a dream, and as her world shook at the indescribably sweet sensation, an indecipherable cry of ecstasy escaped her.

This was where her life had been leading, Abby thought. She believed that now. He filled her completely, becoming a part of her. Each touch, each kiss, was unbearably perfect. His cries of pleasure were food to her hungry heart.

And just before the sky opened and allowed a little bit of heaven to shine on them, she knew that she had been irrevocably changed by the man in her arms.

Even after his heart slowed its hectic pace and his breathing returned to normal, Joe still held her. He didn't want to let go of her. He held her tightly to him, stroking her hair with rough, shaky caresses as another kind of urgency took hold of him.

"I don't ever want to leave," he whispered harshly. "I want to keep you prisoner in this broken-down cabin forever."

"I know, I know," she agreed softly, kissing his hand as it passed her lips. "I want that too." She sighed. "But I'm afraid we have to get back to reality."

He closed his eyes tightly, then, as though something had exploded inside him, he gripped her shoulders and stared at her fiercely. "Dammit, Abby, this is reality!" he said in a rough, strained voice. "You said you would feel guilty about a casual affair. Do you feel guilty?" He gave her a small shake. "Do you?"

She shook her head, her disheveled hair swirling around her face.

"Of course you don't. What we have together is not strawberry-flavored douche and a diaphragm shoved into your purse at the last minute. Open your eyes and see me. Please, Abby," he whispered. "Let me in."

Abby stared at him in confusion and pain. She had hurt him in some way, hurt him terribly. But she couldn't understand how. And she didn't know what to do to make it right.

"Joe," she whispered. Her mouth was so dry, the word was almost painful. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Wait," he said, interrupting her jerkily. He sucked in a raspy breath and closed his eyes tightly. When he opened them again, his eyes were strangely sad. "Never mind, sweetheart," he whispered. Then almost to himself he added, "It was too soon, too damn soon."

"Joe, tell me . . . please."

He hugged her hard, then held her away from him to give her a smile that made her dizzy. It was as though the world had decided to start spinning again.

"Not now," he said, standing up. "The rain's stopped. I think we better make another stab at finding the car."

The next day Joe's steps slowed as he climbed Abby's porch. He grinned when he pictured her reaction to what was happening in her *Bardle*. *I probably won't find it so amusing when she starts to blast me*, he thought, shaking his head.

He opened the screen door and raised his hand to knock, but before his knuckles could even touch the wood, the door was opened just a crack. Then suddenly a slender arm snaked out, grasped him roughly by the collar, and hauled him urgently inside.

"Joe," Abby said, her voice panicky as she parted the curtains a bit to look out at the street. "They all know, Joe." The words came out in a frantic whisper. "Everyone in town knows we didn't come home last night."

Joe didn't respond.

"And that's not all. They're thrilled, Joe." Her hand moved to grasp his arm tightly. "Do you understand what that means? Do you know why they're all so pleased?"

Her eyelids closed as she said the next words slowly. "They're asking if we've set the wedding date."

He nodded. "Yes, I know."

Moaning miserably, she buried her face in his chest and her words were muffled in

his shirt. "You mean they've been asking you too?"

"Uh-huh," he said agreeably.

"What did you tell them?" She glanced up at him again.

"I told them I want the kids to get to know me first so it would probably be several months before we got married," he said calmly.

"You what!"

He flinched as the anticipated explosion came with spectacular swiftness. "Now, babe," he said as he backed away, from the fury in her eyes.

"Don't you 'now, babe' me," she hissed. "What were you thinking of? What in the world possessed you? This is carrying the joke a little too far. You'll go on your merry way after the school year and leave me holding the bag. Of all the addle-brained—"

"It isn't a joke. I meant it."

She reacted to his softly spoken words as though he had dropped a bomb, her eyes reflecting her shock.

"Ever since I met you, you've been trying to keep me out of the mainstream of your life," he continued. "It won't work, Abby. I'm in it and I'm going to stay in it."

She shook her head vigorously. "You don't know what you're saying, Joe, you can't possibly—"

"I do know and I can possibly." He clasped her neck with both hands, lifting her chin until she met his eyes. "Abby, I love you. Will you marry me?" He ran his large, rough thumb across her lips. "For the first time in my life I feel like a whole person. You did that, Abby. You make me real." His voice dropped to a low, husky whisper. "Say yes, Abby."

Abby closed her eyes and the words rippled through her as though they were physically penetrating every inch of her body. He loved her. He wanted to marry her.

A blinding light exploded in her head, a

light that was love, that she could feel filling the room.

For a delicious few seconds she ignored every question, every objection, and simply let the joy permeate her flesh.

But the objections wouldn't stay contained for very long and eventually she opened her eyes. Staring up at him, she whispered, "Oh, Joe, I've never in my life had anything so beautiful happen to me. But—"

"No buts, Abby," he said softly. "Just say yes."

She shook her head slightly. "Don't you see? You wouldn't simply be marrying me. You would be taking on a whole family. You don't even know Brennie and Jeff."

"I know Jeff," he corrected. "We got to know each other very well on the camping trip. And I'm sure it will be just as easy to get to know Brennie."

"Easy?" she said, raking her fingers through her hair as she walked a couple of steps away from him. "Nothing is ever easy where kids are concerned. And you got to know Jeff as a football hero, not as a father. Believe me, that's a completely different thing." She shook her head. "The first time you tell him he can't blow up the attic, your superstar status will slip immeasurably."

"And it should." He stared at her for a moment. "Don't you think I can succeed as a father without a big name to back me up?"

She had hurt him again. Without thinking, without meaning to, she had hurt him badly. She could see it in his eyes, even though his expression was guarded.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I think you would be a success at anything you set your mind to. I simply wanted you to know what you're trying to take on. Are you sure you want to try?"

"I'm sure. But Abby"—he held her

chin in one large hand, his thumb stroking her cheek in a strangely intense caress—"are you willing to give me a chance? Can you hold back the doubts long enough for us to see if it will work?"

He didn't know what he was asking of her, she thought. How could she hold back the doubts when she knew what was ahead of them and he didn't? She had no doubt that Brennie and Jeff would accept Joe; but could Joe accept all the problems that went along with acquiring a ready-made family?

She drew a deep breath. The questions would never be answered until they gave it a try. And if anyone was worth taking a chance on, she knew, it was Joe. "Okay, quarterback," she said, grinning. "I'm game if you are. What do we do first?"

"First we go get the kids," he said, his eyes burning with excitement. "If they're going to get to know me, we might as well start now."

Before Abby could catch her breath, they were in Joe's Buick headed toward her parents' house. She chewed thoughtfully on her fingernail, then turned to glance at him. "You know, it's probably a good thing we're going to pick the kids up now. The way gossip spreads around here, my parents may already have dropped subtle hints to Brennie and Jeff about having a new father."

"Will you mind?" he asked, glancing at her sharply. "If they already know?"

"No," she said slowly. "They'll know sooner or later, but I'd like it to come from us."

He nodded, then gave a short laugh. "I never thought I'd be terrified of two kids. What if they hate the idea?"

"They won't," she said, giving his hard thigh a reassuring squeeze. "They're normal kids. They give love freely to anyone who wants it."

Giving her a doubtful look, he said, "Maybe we should wait a little while to

tell them . . . just until they get to know me better."

Abby hid her relief in a brilliant smile. "That would probably be best. It would give you all a chance to relax and learn about each other."

As soon as they pulled up in the driveway of her parents' house to the accompaniment of three barking dogs, Abby knew her parents had definitely heard the gossip.

They were standing on the porch. Her father's bushy eyebrows couldn't have gone any higher on his forehead without merging with his gray hair and her mother looked as if she was about to burst.

Luckily, though, they hadn't said anything to Jeff and Brennie. There was no awkwardness in the way the children greeted Abby and Joe.

Brennie wanted her mother to see the dress her grandmother had made for her and Jeff pulled steadily on Joe's arm, fervently urging him outside to view his pig.

Joe allowed himself to be led out of the house, shrugging as he glanced over his shoulder at Abby. The pigpen was a comfortable distance from the house, situated out of sight, behind a small stand of trees.

Standing on the bottom rung of the high fence of the pen, Joe gazed down at the animal that was, in its own way, strangely attractive. "That's a pig, all right," he said with an admiring grin.

"Best of the litter, Pop says," Jeff bragged.

"Where's Brennie's pig?" Joe asked, glancing at the other animals.

Jeff didn't answer right away. He stared off into the distance at a tree-topped hill. "She died," he said finally.

"I'm sorry about that, Jeff," Joe said quietly. "Was Brennie very upset?"

He nodded. "I think it reminded her of Daddy dying."

"How about you?" Joe probed gently. "Did it remind you of that too?"

"Yeah, I guess it did." He turned solemn eyes toward Joe. "Why does it happen, Joe? Why do things die?"

Joe felt his heart begin to beat faster. What could he say? he wondered. How on earth could he answer a question like that? Was this what parenting was all about? Doing the impossible?

"That's a tough one, Jeff," he said slowly, knowing that platitudes were not what the boy needed to hear. "I suppose someone has already told you that thing about God needing your Dad up in heaven?"

Jeff nodded. "Harry's mother said that. I didn't believe it, though. It doesn't make sense. I mean, God can do anything he wants to. How can he need my Dad more than I do?"

"I agree. It doesn't make sense." He hesitated, hoping against hope that he wouldn't fail Jeff. "Jeff, I'm going to give you one of the secrets of being grown-up. Do you think you can handle it?"

The boy thought for a second. "I guess so. Mom says she tells me everything because I only absorb the stuff I can use. So I guess if I can't handle it, I'll just forget it."

Joe looked down at the young face and spoke quietly. "When you get to be an adult, Jeff, you find out that there simply are no answers to the most important questions. At least not answers that we can understand. I could tell you there was some grand and mysterious reason why your father died, but the plain truth is I just don't know. That's what you learn and come to accept when you grow up. You learn that you'll never have all the answers."

Had he done the right thing? Joe asked himself later, as he and Jeff walked back to the house.

He couldn't help feeling that he had failed miserably in his first attempt to establish a sound relationship with Abby's

children. What did he know about being a parent, anyway? Kids were so sensitive. What if he did something out of ignorance that screwed them up for life?

Glancing up, he saw Brennie running toward them and forced the doubts out of his mind. What he was facing was the toughest challenge of his life, he knew, but he had more to gain than ever before, and he couldn't let himself give up before he had tried his damndest.

At the kitchen window, Abby held back the white lace curtain and watched Joe walk back to the house. Brennie held his hand while Jeff walked backwards in front of them, talking his normal ninety miles a minute. The three of them made a picture that would stay with her forever, a picture that made her heart ache with pleasure.

The school year had begun at last. And one of the consequences was that Joe saw Abby even less than before. Abby was busy with her classes and with Brennie and Jeff. And Joe not only had the new experience of teaching to cope with, but also the fact that any free time he had was taken up by the football team.

He knew Abby had expected things to be more settled between them before the beginning of the school year, and twice she had talked to him about telling Brennie and Jeff of their wedding plans.

But both times Joe had stopped her.

As he walked to the practice field, he thought of the weeks that had passed since he had proposed to Abby. During that time he had come to know and love her children. And he wanted more than ever for the four of them to be a real family. But two things stopped him from moving ahead with their plans.

The first was the fact that not once had Abby said she loved him. At times he could feel love for him pouring out of her. Then, in the dark of night, the doubts would begin again. He just couldn't go

ahead with their plans until he was absolutely sure of her feelings.

The other thing that stopped him was the doubt he felt about himself. Although he told himself he was creating problems, he still worried constantly about his ability to be the right kind of father to Brennie and Jeff.

Brennie and Jeff seemed to like him well enough, but they still treated him like a friend of the family. How could he make them see him as a father instead?

His steps slowed and his head began to ache when he thought of the possibility of losing Abby now that he had come to need her so much. He wanted her desperately, and the kids were a part of her. Whatever happened, he had to do right by the three of them.

The boys were already at practice when Joe got to the field. As he watched over his team, Joe felt satisfaction and even excitement growing inside him. It was like watching a flower bloom.

Suddenly his eyes noticed a small figure on one of the benches. Waving to Brennie, he signaled to the team to head for the showers; then, wiping his face with the towel that hung around his neck, he walked toward her.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said, sitting down beside her. "Did you stop by to walk me home?" He was escorted to Abby's house each day by either Brennie or Jeff.

She shrugged. "I just wanted to watch and Mom said I could stay until you finished."

He stared down at her for a minute. "Honey, is something wrong? You look a little pale."

She started to shake her head, then leaned it against him instead. "Joe, I really don't feel too good. I've got a terrible stomachache."

He stood, pulling her up with him. "I think the time has come to go home, don't you?"

They walked off the practice field together, but before they had gotten more than a block away, Brennie suddenly doubled over, moaning.

Scooping her up in his arms, Joe carried her quickly toward Abby's house. When he leaned his head down to reassure her, he felt the heat in her face and all his muscles tightened in fear.

Abby must have seen them from the window, for she met them on the porch. "What happened?" she asked, anxiously reaching for her daughter. "Is she hurt?"

"She says it's just a stomachache, but she's running a fever." He kept his voice carefully calm, unwilling to let her see his uncertainty.

Abby walked ahead. "Let's get her in bed," she said.

In Brennie's bedroom, Joe laid her down on the bed and stared down at her in concern. "Brennie, honey, do you mind if I poke you a little?"

"Joe—" Abby began, fear showing in her eyes and her voice.

"Just a second, Abby." When Brennie shook her head, he pressed softly on her abdomen, then lower and lower until he reached the spot that brought a gasp of pain from the girl.

He glanced up at Abby. "I think we should take her in to the hospital, Abby. Why don't you call Dr. Harding and tell him we're coming?"

Five minutes later they were in the station wagon on their way to the hospital. Jeff shared the front seat with Joe while Abby held Brennie's head in her lap in the back. No one spoke. Even Jeff seemed unusually subdued.

Doctor Harding was at the hospital when they arrived and immediately took Brennie away to examine her. Joe stood impatiently at the window of the waiting room for a moment, staring at the parking lot with unseeing eyes.

Suddenly, without a word to Jeff and

Abby, he left them sitting on the green plastic sofa and began to hunt for the coffee machine. He simply couldn't sit quietly and wait.

All his life when something needed to be done Joe had gone and done it. That's all there was to it, he thought. He had merely determined what action was necessary and then he'd taken it. Never had he felt the kind of helplessness he felt now. There was absolutely nothing he could do except wait, and it was driving him crazy.

Suddenly Joe realized what he was doing. He was so busy concentrating on his own fears that he was forgetting there was something he could do, something he had to do. Maybe not for Brennie; he had to leave her in the doctor's hands, but he could be there for Abby and Jeff.

He carried two cups of coffee back to the waiting room. Setting them on the coffee table, he lowered himself onto the couch and picked up both of Abby's hands, squeezing them tightly between his.

"Joe, she looked so fragile when they took her away." Abby's voice was only a thin, high whisper.

"She's a normal, healthy girl, Abby," he said, willing certainty into his voice. "Nowadays appendectomies are considered routine. She'll be fine."

At that moment Dr. Harding stepped into the waiting room and they rose expectantly. "You were right, Joe," he said calmly. "It's the appendix. And I'm afraid we'll have to take it out now. It's already ruptured."

When Dr. Harding left the waiting room, Joe turned to Abby. "I hate the thought of leaving you," he said, "but don't you think Jeff would be better off spending the night with Harrison and Judy?"

"Yes," she said wearily. "Yes, of course you're right. I didn't think of that."

She looked up and seemed to recognize

the concern in his eyes. "Don't worry," she said, smiling. "I'll be fine. And so will Brennie. You go ahead and take care of Jeff."

His mind was so taken up with Abby and Brennie that for a long while Joe didn't notice the unusual silence in the car. When he did, he said softly, "She really will be all right, Jeff."

After a moment Jeff answered in a small voice, "A couple of weeks ago I teased her about getting breasts and last night I put a frog in her bed."

Joe chuckled, reaching over to give him a reassuring hug. "That's all a part of being a brother. I'll bet Brennie understands that."

"She didn't act like she understood last night," Jeff said ruefully, then grinned. "Brennie yells louder than anyone I know."

They laughed together and Joe could feel the boy relax. Suddenly he looked up and studied Joe's face intently.

"Something else bothering you?"

He didn't take his eyes off Joe as he said bluntly, "People are saying that you're going to marry Mom."

Joe sighed roughly. He and Abby should have known that the rumors would eventually get back to the children. Without taking his eyes off the road, Joe said, "Would you mind . . . if it were the truth?"

"No," he said slowly. "I don't think so. When I first heard about it, I thought it would be super having a football player for a father, but then I thought . . . well, you're a football player to everybody. See?"

"I think so. You mean a father should be different to a son than he is to everyone else."

"Yeah." Jeff stared at him as though expecting an instant answer.

Drawing a bracing breath, Joe gave it a try. "When your mother and I get married, then it will be different. You'll stop think-

ing of me as a football player and I won't be the father of any of the other guys."

"Yeah," Jeff said, his eyes growing bright. "None of the other guys will be there when you belch after dinner or anything."

Joe's shoulders shook with laughter. "I don't think your mother will allow too much belching, but you've got the right idea."

"Joe," Jeff said after a thoughtful moment. "Will I call you Dad?"

This was the question Joe had been dreading for weeks. "Do you want to?" he asked finally.

"I don't know," Jeff said slowly, then added, "But if I do, it won't mean that I've forgotten about Daddy."

Joe couldn't speak for a second. Then, when they pulled into Judy and Harrison's driveway, he turned and looked down at Jeff. "I know that, son. I don't want you to forget him."

Jeff stared up at him, eyes wide, then suddenly threw his thin arms around Joe's waist. Before Joe could react, he was out of the car, running to meet Harry, who stood in the doorway.

Joe felt a strange glow as he drove back to the hospital.

The feeling sustained him through the waiting period of Brennie's operation. When Dr. Harding walked into the room to tell them that Brennie had come through it just fine, he felt that nothing could ever go wrong again.

They waited for a while to see Brennie when she came out from under the anesthetic. Then Joe insisted that Abby go home to sleep.

As they walked in the front door, she suddenly turned to him and laughed.

"What's funny?" he said, pulling her into his arms.

"I was just thinking about what Jeff told me in the waiting room. I kept saying I couldn't understand how something like

this could happen to someone as healthy as Brennie, and Jeff looked up at me with those big, solemn eyes and said, 'When you grow up you know that some questions don't have answers.'"

Joe smiled a slow, secret smile. "Maybe he's just growing up."

"Maybe," she said quietly, then she shuddered. "Joe, I never really thought about how very much of my life was taken up with the kids. Not until you came along. Now I wonder why I didn't see it before. Someday they'll leave. That's part of life. And the emptiness that I would have faced then is terrible to think about."

She grinned suddenly. "Of course, I have no intention of saving you for my old age. You're pretty handy to have around right now. And I'm not the only one who thinks so. If you listen to Brennie and Jeff, you single-handedly built the seven wonders of the world."

He smiled slightly. "They do seem to be accepting me, don't they?"

"Accepting you?" she asked incredulously. "Joe, they love you."

He ran his fingers through his hair. "I've been afraid for a long time now, Abby. Afraid I wouldn't measure up to what a father should be. I was so sure I would screw up with them."

"But you're wonderful with them. You love them, and that's what's important."

She sat down on the couch and pulled him down beside her. "I guess we don't always show you how much we need you. I think tonight has made me realize just how much." She touched his face and smiled. "Even if I didn't love you to distraction, I'd still keep you."

"I'm so glad," Joe whispered, tears in his eyes. ♥

Tarnished Armor

Sara Thorne had escaped her privileged past for the privacy of Roanoke, Virginia. But things weren't so quiet once Michael Ryan entered her life.

— ANN SMITH —

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Sara Thorne heard the apartment manager in the hallway, showing the vacant unit across from hers.

"This is the only two bedroom unit on this floor, Mr. Ryan, and it'll be available on Monday. We're planning to paint it over the weekend." The sound of the voice tapered off as the door closed.

I'll need a two bedroom apartment myself this time next year, Sara mused. There will be all those baby things and a crib . . . She rubbed her palm over the flatness of

her abdomen, wondering when she would begin to show.

"That will be fine, Mrs. Davis," a baritone rumbled from the hallway. "I'll move in on Monday."

Sara's attention was drawn to the door as she heard their footsteps echoing down the stairs. She conjured up a face to go with the resonant voice of Mr. Ryan. He'd be tall, maybe dark and handsome. Don't kid yourself, Sara, she chided. He's probably short, fat and bald. She didn't know

what difference it would make; she'd probably never even see him.

Sara pushed her fingers through her blond hair and centered her blue eyes on the knitting instructions she'd just picked up. Taking needles and yellow yarn in hand, she was sure a well-educated woman of twenty-nine could learn to make a pair of booties.

The apartment wasn't at all what Michael Ryan was used to living in. But until he knew what he was going to do with his life, it would suffice. Besides, it was the only place that allowed him to rent on a monthly basis; all others he'd looked at required a year's lease.

He virtually ignored Mrs. Davis as he observed the austerity of the unit, mentally planning what furniture he'd rent. The bathroom fixtures were white, the carpet beige. At least everything was light; Michael had seen enough darkness to last him the rest of his natural life.

"The walls will be white?" he verified.

"Of course. Now, Mr. Ryan, if you'll just look. . ."

"How much deposit?" He opened the door to the hallway, trying to move the talkative woman along.

"One hundred dollars and a full month's rent."

Michael'd heard all he needed to know as he followed her down the stairwell and into her office to sign the lease. On the street again, he got into his nondescript green Plymouth and headed to a furniture rental business. A bank stop followed, then the telephone company. All the motions of a man who was moving to town.

When he'd been given the choice of twenty places he could live, he'd excluded more than half of them because of climate, knowledge of the town activities, their proximities to resort areas or some other reason. Not wanting New England, California, Florida, Nevada or New Jer-

sey had eliminated another five possibilities. Three cities had been too small and he'd be obvious as an outsider. That left Boise, Idaho and Roanoke, Virginia.

Boise he'd scratched off because he'd never been too much of a potato man, preferring pasta, and it was still too close to Chicago. That left Roanoke.

With a metropolitan area of over two hundred thousand, Roanoke provided the anonymity he wanted. Whatever he ended up doing wouldn't make waves. Or at least nothing that could be traced as far away as Chicago or New York.

Renting the bare minimum of furniture to furnish his new digs, he stopped in an office supply store, purchased a typewriter, a bottle of correction ink and a ream of paper. Maybe he would start on a book.

Satisfied that he could convince anyone he was a writer, Michael gave that as his occupation to the bank representative when he opened both a savings and checking account. He didn't miss her casual assessment of his dark, curly hair, his brown eyes or his slim tall body. She told him she, too, was single, and welcomed him to the Roanoke area. Also if he had any questions about the area, just to call and ask her.

Michael declined to be a Private Banking customer, and ignored her subtle hint that she was interested in him. He wondered how long it would be before he would feel comfortable making friends. Or dating. No, the question wasn't how long, it was if.

As Sara dressed for work on Monday, she heard the groans of workmen carrying furniture to the second floor. Mr. Ryan was moving in on schedule. Even though she had no intention of making his acquaintance, it was comforting to know there was another person on her end of the hall. During the time she'd been in Roanoke, there had been a few skirmishes

in the parking lot and some unsettling noises on the first floor. She'd been afraid; knowing a man was close helped. Adjusting to being alone had been a major hurdle for her.

Sidestepping men carrying chairs in the hallway, she scanned the open doorway to Mr. Ryan's apartment to get a glimpse of him, but no one was there. Her practiced eye noted the quality of the furniture. Obviously, Mr. Ryan didn't have any more money than she did. But that shouldn't surprise her. These apartments were the cheapest she could find in a neighborhood where she felt reasonably safe. Rich people were hardly likely to live here.

Brilliant sunshine flooded the warm early October day, lifting Sara's spirits. Keeping a safe distance off the road, she began her mile walk to the shopping center. Today she'd redo the display window with a Halloween motif. All thoughts of her new neighbor receded as she planned her day.

Michael heard the door close across the hall, but he was distracted by a question from one of the movers and didn't have a chance to see his neighbor. After the men left, he looked around at his new home. Quite a come down from his previous residence. No original paintings adorned the walls. No expensive comfortable furniture. No art objects scattered about. All the trappings of his former life had been sold and converted to cash. He wondered how long he could live like this.

He'd had seventeen years, since he was twenty-one, to think this move over; somehow he'd never imagined it'd be like this.

When the teenage girl who worked evenings relieved her, Sara walked to the grocery store in the mall where she worked. Taking her carefully prepared store list with the weekly specials annotated and

her supply of coupons, she did the shopping quickly, not even tempted to purchase anything that wasn't listed. With her meager bag of necessities, she began the trek home.

Home. Idle thoughts of her real home clouded her mind as she walked along the dirt shoulder of the road. The staff would be setting the table for dinner. Horton, the butler, would be checking everything to make sure it was perfect—the wine chilled exactly right, the silver laid perfectly, the mahogany table polished to high sheen, flowers and candles arranged.

Sara didn't miss any of that. Nor did she miss the haughty conversation that would ensue around the table with her parents, her older sister and her pompous husband, and her snobby older brother and his dippy wife. Remembrances of those stately dinners every night where the favorite topic of conversation was Sara's wild ways made her smile. She wondered what her stuffy family talked about now.

What she did miss was the food. Hannah, the cook, had always served scrumptious meals, luscious desserts and hot breads. In the two months Sara'd been away from home, Hannah's cooking was what she'd thought of most. It didn't say much for her family.

The bitter final scene with her parents and siblings replayed in her mind as she let herself into her dark apartment. Her parents had been outraged when Sara told them she was pregnant and had no intention of marrying the father.

"Do you even know who the father is?" her father had asked angrily.

"Yes, of course," Sara'd answered.

In tears, her mother had said, "You'll have to have an abortion." Not a question, just a statement.

Sara had thought that through before telling her parents anything about her pregnancy. She'd already made her deci-

sion.

"No, I won't have an abortion, Mother," she'd stated unequivocally.

Wringing her hands, thinking of the Thorne's social position, Irene Thorne said, "I don't know why you couldn't have been like our other children. They're always reasonable."

"I'm going to go away, Mother," Sara'd announced. "I won't stay to embarrass you."

"Don't expect me to condone this, Sara," her father said, still angry.

"I don't expect anything from you, either of you. You can just forget you ever had me."

"You've been a problem all your life," her mother said.

"I know. A wayward child, not like Ethan and Helen, who've always been perfect. I'll apologize now for the things I did to embarrass you. You can tell all your snobbish friends that I have gone out east or to Europe or whatever pleases you." Sara was angry, too, that they offered her no support.

"You'll not get one dime from me, Sara!" her father shouted as she left the picture-perfect living room.

A wry smile crossed Sara's lips now as she changed into comfortable clothes and padded barefoot to the efficiency kitchen. Her father hadn't been lying; the next day he'd closed her bank account before she'd had an opportunity to withdraw any funds.

Learning to be poor had been a real experience for her. Adrift with no source of income, because she'd never worked at anything but having a good time, she'd had to pawn her jewelry and sell her fur coats, getting only a fraction of their worth. Even her fancy sports car had been traded in on a used compact, something that would get her as far away as possible from the wealthy Thornes of Beverly Hills, West Palm Beach and the French

Riviera.

But she had been adamant in not asking for their help. Anger had kept her company on the cross country trip to Virginia. When she was a teenager, her family had vacationed at The Homestead in Hot Springs, Virginia and she remembered liking the state. She chose Roanoke because of its size and the opportunity to get a job and medical care.

She'd been lucky in finding her job as manager of the card and gift shop. Mrs. Durand, the owner, had been desperate. Sara knew enough about entertaining, place settings, candles and such to convince the woman she could handle the job. Wanting to change her life completely, she'd been honest with Mrs. Durand, telling her about her pregnancy and her circumstances. She got the job anyway; Mrs. Durand liked honesty.

Sara was brought back to the present by the closing of the door across the hall. Mr. Ryan must be home, she thought, noting the time. He must have been out to dinner. Sara spent no more time thinking about the elusive Mr. Ryan. It was almost eight o'clock and she was too tired to think about anything. She showered and went to bed.

Michael spent the first week at his new apartment scanning the business opportunity want-ads looking for a viable business he could purchase. He didn't have much interest in anything advertised. Restaurants, convenience stores and service stations held no appeal. Certainly antique shops and bath boutiques were not for him. Next week he'd contact a business broker and let him do some searching. He had to do something. The boredom was killing him.

And his apartment was entirely too dismal. If he were going to put down roots, he'd need a house. Having property to tend to would keep him occupied some of

the time. He'd contact a residential realtor.

While he tried not to term the counseling he'd received as "therapy," privately he always called it that. They'd said he should become active doing something. A small business in an unrelated field had been suggested. That eliminated food, vending machines, music, movie theaters, video stores, transportation in any form and anything associated with unions. Certainly drug trafficking, gambling and prostitution were not what interested him. Anything in the manufacturing category stood a chance of being unionized at any time.

That didn't leave much. The long arm of his past professional life was going to choke him if he didn't find something.

When he heard the soft closing of the door across the hall Friday night, he noted the time. Nine-thirty. Whoever lived there was late this evening. He or she usually was home before seven.

One of the few things Michael liked about his new life was the luxury of sleeping late. By nature a night person, he seldom went to bed before one or two in the morning and didn't get up until after nine. There wasn't much to get up for anyway.

So when he was roused from a deep sleep by a frantic pounding on his front door at seven-thirty on Sunday morning, he was instantly furious. No one should be getting him up at this ungodly hour. When the noise didn't subside, he slipped out of bed, pulled on faded jeans and the shirt he'd worn the night before, letting it hang loose and unbuttoned. Taking barefoot strides to the door, he attempted to neaten his thick dark hair to some semblance of order. He jerked open the door ready to lash out at whoever had made the mistake of knocking.

Panicked blue eyes in a flushed face looked up at him but he wasn't given

much time to evaluate the woman's looks before she began a tirade.

"Mr. Ryan, I'm sorry to bother you but I live across the hall and a pipe has burst or something in my kitchen and there's water everywhere. Could you help me please? It's flooding everything!" She'd started back across the narrow hall expecting him to follow, which he did.

"Where?" he asked quickly once they were in her apartment. Water trickled into the carpet in the living room and Michael winced when the cold liquid seeped through his bare toes, water flowed freely from under the kitchen sink. He hunkered down and peered into the dark cabinet.

"Do you have a flashlight?"

"No, but I could get a lamp," she suggested.

"Better not, we don't want to get shocked." Both of them were standing in water to their ankles. With one of his long arms, he pushed aside the bottles of cleaning supplies and groped in the back of the cabinet. His fingers touched the cutoff valve for the water. With superhuman strength, he wrenched the rusty handle until the flow of water stopped. Splashing in the water, he got up and assessed the mess.

"I guess we need some towels," she said.

"Wouldn't hurt," he replied, slinging his hands to partially dry them, then rubbing them on his already soaked jeans. He watched her open a drawer and pull out a thin terrycloth dishtowel which she handed to him. He dried his hands, then swiped at his jeans but realized that was useless.

While he was doing that, she'd gone from the room and returned with two bath towels. She appeared helpless as to what to do with them.

"These won't even begin to sop up this mess," she said sadly, "and I don't have any more."

"How about a blanket or quilt?"

"I only have the one on my bed."

She went to get the blanket and Michael went across the hall to get what he had, bringing all his new towels and two new blankets with him. He'd stopped to pull on sneakers and socks; his feet were freezing.

They worked in silence, each putting their linens down on the floor to absorb the liquid. Michael wrung out the towels in the kitchen sink. When the worst of it was up, he turned to her.

"That takes care of most of it, I guess," he said, looking around.

"Mr. Ryan, I really appreciate this. I had no idea how to turn off the water. All I did was use that spray thing to rinse out the sink and then I heard a big pop and water covered my feet."

"How do you know my name?"

She blushed. "I overheard the apartment manager showing you the apartment. The walls and doors are thin here."

Michael agreed with that. He'd heard her coming and going every morning and night. He smiled.

"That's true. What else can I help with?"

"Nothing. I'll take these wet things to the basement and dry them for you and return them this afternoon."

Michael glanced at her. She was too pale even for such a fair skinned person. "You can't lift these wet blanket's, I'll do it." He reached for the nearest blanket on the floor and Sara bent over to help him lift the sodden mass.

As she bent, she became dizzy and fell on the floor.

Michael leaned over, picked her small framed body up and carried her to the living room sofa. "Are you sick?" he asked.

"No, just dizzy for a moment. I'm sorry."

"Just sit there. I'll get the blankets. You're sure you're okay?"

"Yes."

Michael stared at her for a moment. Now that she was upright on the sofa, color was coming back into her cheeks. Although he had no experience with fainting women, she looked all right to him. Still watching her closely, he backed into the kitchen. The soaked blankets were heavy, and even as strong as Michael was he had to make two trips to the basement laundry area to carry them.

Just as he was reaching into his jeans pocket to extract some quarters, he heard her voice behind him.

"I'll pay for this, Mr. Ryan," she said softly, her hand extended with four quarters when he turned to look at her.

Strange that he hadn't noticed how lovely she was upstairs. She had classic rich girl looks—that indefinable something that said she'd always been well cared for.

Michael took the proffered coins. He'd done his own laundry the day before and had a working knowledge of the washer and dryer. He put two washers on the spin cycle to force out as much water as possible before drying.

They stood in silence for a few moments. Michael was uncomfortable with it. "I'll go put some coffee on while that's spinning," he blurted out, then left the enclosed room.

Back at his place, he ground expensive coffee beans, measured out his usual four cups, then added two more. Now that he'd turned off her water, she couldn't make any coffee. Perhaps she'd like a cup. Dangerous, Michael, dangerous, he cautioned himself.

Leaving the coffee dripping, he bolted down the stairwell two steps at a time, arriving just in time to see the woman struggling with a heavy blanket from one washer.

"I'll do that!" he said, a bit harshly.

Instantly, Sara stepped back and let him lift the heavy load. But not without pro-

test. "I've got to learn how to do this for myself sometime."

"Not today," he said succinctly.

"I guess we didn't introduce ourselves properly. I'm Sara Thorne."

"Michael Ryan."

"I really do appreciate your help, Mr. Ryan. I've just never had any experience with household disasters."

Michael filled two dryers with the laundry and added quarters he brought. "Michael."

"Pardon?"

"Call me Michael." He could believe she'd never had too much experience with this kind of thing. Probably had been waited on hand and foot. He mentally chastised himself for thinking that. Who was he to cast aspersions? In the last twenty years he hadn't done much for himself either. Only his mother's careful training when he was a teenager had saved him.

"I'd offer you a cup of coffee but I don't have any water," Sara said with a smile. "You look like you could use a jolt of caffeine."

"I'm not a morning person," he said laconically, but softened it with a smile.

Sara nodded. "I really am sorry . . ."

"No trouble."

Sara stopped at Mrs. Davis' apartment but she wasn't home. Frustrated because now she couldn't cook anything until the pipes were repaired, Sara reconciled herself to having cold food all day. She knew anyone else would have eaten out, but she couldn't afford that.

Michael was at his door when she came upstairs. "Coffee's ready, if you'd like a cup," he invited.

"I'd love one," she said thankfully. "I was just getting ready to make some when

"Sure." Michael indicated she should come in.

Once in his apartment, she asked what he did.

"I'm a writer."

"Novels? Articles?"

"Working on a novel." He handed her a cup of steaming coffee. "Cream? Sugar?"

Normally Sara drank hers black, but he pushed the carton of half and half toward her and she indulged.

"What do you do?"

"I manage Portia's Card and Gift Shop in the shopping center just down the road. I've only done it for a month, but I really like it."

"You don't have much of a southern accent, have you lived here long?"

"Five weeks. I'm originally from California."

"What brings you here?"

Sara smiled. "A lot of things. It's a long story, I'm sure you wouldn't be interested."

"Try me." He surprised himself with just how interested he was.

After that awful night when Sara found out she was pregnant, she'd resolved to change her whole life. Part of that was being honest. Michael Ryan was a stranger to her and other than the incident today, he probably always would be, so she saw no harm in telling him what he asked.

"I'm pregnant and not married. I was going to be an embarrassment to my parents so I chose to leave home and make it on my own. I came here and got a job."

"Is your name Thorne with an 'E'?"

"Yes."

"Does your father happen to be Claude Thorne of Los Angeles?"

She looked surprised. "The same. Do you know him?"

"I read about him in some business magazine," Michael said quickly, "while doing some research for my book."

Sara nodded. There had been many articles written about Claude Thorne so that didn't surprise her.

"Where are you from?"

"All over. I travel around a lot. Why

didn't you marry the father of your baby?"

This time Sara giggled. "He didn't ask me. To be truthful, he doesn't know I'm pregnant. And I don't want him to know. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go see about those blankets." She rose from the table.

"Have another cup of coffee, I'll go. They're too heavy for you." With that he was out of the apartment.

When he brought the folded blankets and towels back to his apartment, Sara was idly reading his Sunday newspaper, but she swiftly folded it back together when he came into the room.

"I'm sorry, but it was just such a temptation," she apologized.

The woman couldn't even afford a newspaper, for God's sake! Her father must have cut her off completely.

Michael smiled. "Go ahead and read, if you like. I'll put your stuff in your apartment."

"Thanks," Sara said, sitting back down at the dinette table.

Michael took a good look at her apartment when he carried the linens inside. Just like his, but smaller, it was just as austere. He knew his was only a temporary measure, but Sara Thorne was really in trouble. A wave of protectiveness washed over him. It was a new sensation, and one he surprisingly wasn't uncomfortable with.

When he returned, Michael asked Sara to have breakfast with him at The Roanoke, a restaurant just down the road from their apartments.

"You don't need to do that," she protested.

"I know, but it's lonely eating out alone. I'd appreciate the company."

"If you're sure . . ."

"I'm sure."

Breakfast was a good time for talking and Michael found out a lot more about Sara. Candidly, she explained about her

family, her exemplary brother and sister, how they'd married appropriately and what a wildcat she, herself, had always been.

"You don't look like much of a rebel to me," Michael intoned.

"I'm not anymore, and I probably never will be again, but I did some pretty racy things."

"Drugs?" he asked.

"Only marijuana once. I traveled with a fast crowd, always looking for something new and exciting. We were all too rich, too spoiled, and bored."

"How about drinking?"

Sara laughed. "Certainly that. That's how I got pregnant."

"You were drunk?"

"We both were. The whole crowd was. We were having a party at somebody's beach house in Malibu . . ." Her voice drifted and her eyes had a faraway look. Michael could tell she was remembering the incident and it was painful to her.

"Let's not talk about former lives, okay?" He changed the subject, suspecting she'd be asking about his before too long. "What hours do you work at the gift shop?"

Sara's face became animated when she told of her work and how much she liked it. She worked days except for Tuesday and Friday nights. Mrs. Durand, the owner, operated three gift shops in the Roanoke area and had needed a manager for Sara's.

"She's been very kind to me. When I explained my circumstances, she understood and gave me a chance. I'm grateful to her for that."

Michael nodded in understanding. Not many people would hire a pregnant woman who'd never had a job.

"Will you keep working after the baby's born?"

"I have to. I'll find a babysitter, I guess."

"Have you thought all this out?"

"More or less." She stared up at Michael, thinking she'd never seen such beautiful, liquid brown eyes before. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this, I'm sure you aren't interested."

"I admire your pluck. You could have taken the easy way out."

Suddenly her eyes filled with tears and she swallowed convulsively. "That's what my mother wanted me to do." She got control and gave him a watery smile. "I took the easy way out all my life. It was time for a change."

"Pretty harsh measures." It was certainly amazing how you could fool some of the people some of the time, Michael thought as he gazed across the table at her. He'd told her he was a writer, which he wasn't, and he hadn't told her where he was from. He'd let her assume he didn't have any money.

"Would you like to drive up on the Blue Ridge Parkway this afternoon and look at the foliage?" he asked.

"I'd love to, but I've already disrupted your day too much, haven't I?"

"I didn't have any plans."

"Don't you write on Sunday?"

At least he could answer that honestly. "No."

It had been years since Michael had enjoyed a day as much as the Sunday he spent with Sara. They had instant rapport and their conversation never lagged. They'd both traveled to many of the same places and they talked about the cultures, the sights and the food in various cities. When she pinned him down about his past writing, he prevaricated by saying it was mostly business articles and research pieces, nothing she would've come across. It was a little more difficult to explain why he'd chosen Roanoke to write his novel, but he expanded on her reason for coming to Virginia: he'd been in the

area once and liked it.

The trees were at their colorful peak and Michael pulled into the overlooks frequently so they could stretch their legs and take in the views. It was the most content Michael could ever remember feeling.

He insisted on buying her dinner at the Peaks of Otter Lodge and stood by peacefully while she perused the gift shop, eyeballing each item, the price and the way it was displayed. A grin crossed his face when she pulled a notepad from her handbag and made notes on manufacturers. It was nine o'clock when they returned to their apartments.

"I've had a wonderful time today, Michael. Thanks for helping this morning and for breakfast and dinner."

"I had a good time, too, Sara. We'll do it again."

"Yes . . . well . . . good night, and thanks again."

Michael smiled as she closed the door to her unit.

Amazingly, Michael was up when a knock sounded on his door the next morning. He smiled when he saw Sara standing there with a pleading look on her face.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Michael. I really hate to ask this, but if you're going to be home today would you let the plumber in? Mrs. Davis won't be here with the master key and I have to go to work."

"Sure, I'll be home all day."

"It's very nice of you."

"What're neighbors for?" He smiled at her again, meeting her blue eyes.

Sara caught him looking at him and blushed. She handed him the key. "Thanks again."

"See you this evening," he said as she started down the stairs.

The plumber came just after ten and Michael walked into Sara's apartment with him. While he worked, Michael satisfied

his curiosity about the way Sara lived. Never once thinking it was an invasion of her privacy, he opened her closet and looked at her clothing. All expensive, many designer labels, everything with coordinating accessories.

Her bathroom was neat with a strange dichotomy of purchases. L'Oreal shampoo stood beside a cheap off-brand cream rinse in the shower. On the vanity, a jewel-encrusted lipstick case was beside a box of cheap tissues.

Back in her bedroom, he noticed she had no bedspread, just the one blanket he'd seen yesterday covering sheets of a plain white cotton. He ran his fingers over the pillowcase. It was rough to his touch. Cheap. The only pieces of furniture in the room were that bed and a battered small chest of drawers. A cardboard carton covered with a remnant of cloth served as a nightstand.

In the living room, a used sofa in a garish print was the focal point. A plastic chair with tears repaired with black electrical tape sat beside it. She'd fashioned a coffee table from two corrugated cartons, then pieced material over the two units. A wooden orange crate had been stained walnut and held an ugly lamp. One of the chairs from her rickety dinette set completed the sitting area.

Michael stepped into the kitchen and listened to the explanation the plumber gave for the leak. After the man left, Michael completed his circuit of Sara Thorne's home by opening the cabinets and the refrigerator. Hell, she didn't have enough food in there, all totaled, to fix one decent meal! A quart of milk, one apple, a small piece of cheese, a jar of peanut butter, half a loaf of bread, a pound of cheap coffee. No produce, no eggs, no meat.

Anger overcame guilt as Michael perused a stack of papers laid out on the dinette table. Her checkbook was there with

a balance of under fifty dollars. On a lone sheet of ledger paper was a budget. What she spent on food in a week was less than he spent on coffee and cream. Lodged underneath her papers was a passbook savings account book. Grand total of \$751.35. She'd made deposits weekly of fifty dollars. This was obviously the nest egg for the baby. He went back to her checkbook, saw the amount of her rent and the checks she'd written to a clinic. At least she was getting prenatal care.

Depressed with the subsistence level on which she lived, Michael closed Sara's apartment and went to his own. Sitting at his table, he had total recall of the figures he'd just seen. With quick calculations, he multiplied the amounts and figured her yearly income.

It was not impressive. In fact, it was damned disgusting that Claude Thorne's daughter had to live like that. Michael knew of Sara's father, knew he was a millionaire several times over, knew of his business acumen, the far-reaching extent of his fortune.

This is not your problem, Michael, he told himself. *Don't get involved.*

That logic lasted for as long as it took Michael to check the businesses for sale in the newspaper, make his bed, shower and shave and call a real estate broker who specialized in commercial endeavors. Less than an hour had gone by.

Boredom didn't sit well with Michael. For the past seventeen years, he'd been busy not only with the day-to-day functioning of his job, but also with paying attention to every nuance, every suggestion, every remark spoken by the members of his organization. It wasn't in his nature to gloss over the high points of anything. He was a detail man, admittedly, and that tendency focused itself on Sara Thorne's life.

Myriad questions came to his mind. Although he had no experience with preg-

nant women or babies, he knew they had to have certain things. Things that cost money, no matter how inexpensive. Maternity clothes. Cribs. Diapers. Food. Doctor's visits. Where was Sara going to get the money for those things?

The answer was simple. She wasn't. By the time the baby was born, she'd be on welfare.

How could she let that happen to herself? Didn't her family care that she was living in such reduced circumstances? Michael drew the obvious parallel of their lives. They'd both left voluntarily. No one knew where they were. They were both starting over from scratch. But there the similarities stopped. She was dirt poor and he had more money than he knew what to do with.

He considered that she might tire of this life and return to the fold of her father's household. She might acknowledge the father of her baby and agree to marriage or knuckle under to the social pressures of her family and accept whatever dictums they doled out. It would be the best thing for her in the long run.

And just how do *you* feel about that, Michael Ryan, he asked himself.

Admitting he was attracted to her was easy. At thirty-eight, he was heading toward forty with a vengeance and no woman had ever stirred him up so quickly. No woman had ever prompted such feelings of protectiveness.

He began formulating a plan.

Sara was busy at the shop that morning. There were the Saturday receipts to count and record in the book, the straightening up that was always necessary after the weekend trade and each Monday she replenished greeting cards from the drawers beneath.

By the time she took a breather, she was surprised to see that it was after one o'clock. And she was hungry. She settled

on the stool behind the checkout counter and withdrew her lunchbag. Before she had a chance to slice the cheese or her apple, the door opened to a smiling Michael Ryan.

"Hi," she said enthusiastically. "In the market for greeting cards today?"

"No, I was out and thought I'd stop by. The plumber came early and did his stuff. Here's your key."

"That was so nice of you, Michael. I'll be happy to return the favor sometime."

"Have you eaten lunch yet?"

"Just getting ready to," she said, pointing to the cheese and apple.

"That's lunch?" He grinned at her and she nodded.

From his other hand he put a sack on the counter. "How about sharing a corned beef on rye with me?"

Sara's mouth watered at the suggestion. Being poor was no fun when you liked to eat. "Do you have enough for both of us?"

"I have two sandwiches."

"Were you going to eat both of them?" He'd been so kind to her already, she didn't want to take advantage.

"I brought one for you."

Michael opened the bag and pulled out two overstuffed sandwiches, still hot, and handed her one. Sara didn't resist the temptation and dived right in. Michael took half of his and began walking through the store. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her eating hungrily and savoring every bite. A pleased smile crossed his face.

Sara stopped eating and waited on customers as they straggled in, answering their questions and getting up to help them find items. During lulls, she finished eating and answered Michael's questions.

"How do you keep track of inventory?"

"The cards and party goods are on a computerized system provided by the card company. We just send in the tickets every week."

"Who keeps the books, pays the bills?"

"I will eventually, when I learn how, but I don't know anything about accounting. Mrs. Durand has promised to teach me.

"Who buys the gift items for the store?"

Sara was flattered that Michael was showing such an interest and she was pleased to flaunt her new knowledge. "Mrs. Durand does. She's promised to take me to a gift show in January in Washington. I'll learn a lot about it then, I suppose. She says that someone who works with the customers will know what they'd like to see on the shelves."

"What would your parents think of you working here?"

Sara laughed and tilted her nose in the air. With a faked haughty look, she said, "A *Thorne* working as a clerk in a gift shop? You've got to be kidding!"

Michael knew Sara would tell him anything he wanted to know, but he found it difficult to keep up a conversation with the influx of customers. Their lunch was finished and he leaned across the counter.

"Will you have dinner with me tonight? I'll cook."

"You've done too much already, Michael. I don't have any way to repay you."

He put a finger under her chin and brought her head up until her eyes were looking at him. "I neither want, nor need, repayment, Sara. All I ask is your company. Pasta for one gets out of hand."

"Pasta? I thought all the Irish ate was potatoes," she teased.

Michael didn't let her statement throw him. When he'd selected the blatantly Irish name, he'd been prepared for this. "Spaghetti and chow mein have become generic, didn't you know? Even the rich can lay claim to them."

Sara agreed to the dinner and looked forward to it all afternoon. It was strange meeting up with him as she had, but she didn't regret it at all. He was fun, although

a little quiet at times, and he would make a good friend to have nearby. She didn't think he had any ulterior motives, nothing sexual, or even romantic. After all, what man yearned after a woman who was pregnant with another man's child?

Michael surprised himself with the enthusiasm he displayed at having Sara over for dinner that evening. After he left the gift shop, he bought everything he needed to cook spaghetti and make a simple dessert and salad. Further shopping provided a tablecloth, wine and a mixed bouquet of flowers from the florist.

When he returned to the apartment, he was further amazed to find himself humming while he vigorously chopped onions and garlic and added them to the simmering tomato sauce on the stove. He grinned when he thought how proud his mother would be if she could see him now.

While his sauce cooked, he stretched out on the sofa and held a glass of wine loosely in his fingers, thinking. For too many years, he'd lived in a vacuum with only one purpose in mind. He hadn't cultivated any personal relationships, hadn't wanted any.

In just two short days, that had changed. He was reluctant to use the word happy, but he would settle for content. He was gratified to find that he still had what was called the milk of human kindness in his soul.

Plain and simple, he wanted to help Sara Thorne. She was like a breath of fresh air to him. But mostly, she was a challenge. And he hadn't had a challenge of his own making in two decades. Life was definitely looking better.

Michael resisted going to get Sara in his car, not wanting to be too obvious, but he opened his door when he heard her coming up the stairs.

"Hi, Michael," she said when she saw

him.

He nodded. "Sara."

She glared at him but with a smile on her lips. "Is the entire conversational burden of this friendship going to be on me?" she asked bluntly.

Michael laughed, then folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the doorjamb. "I'll try to keep up my end. Dinner is ready when you are, the door will be unlocked, just come on over."

Sara grinned. "That's better. Give me about ten minutes."

When she pushed the door open and came into his living room, Michael noticed that she'd changed into pleated slacks and a pink sweatshirt. Cute.

She had a terrific appetite for a small woman and Michael enjoyed watching her eat, but he didn't comment. She chattered about customers in the gift shop, incidents that had happened since she came to work there and again told him how much she enjoyed it.

"It's the first job you've ever had?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm educated and I've been to finishing school, but it was never necessary for me to work. Unfortunately, my parents never thought I should."

"Why have you made such a drastic change in your life? Don't you think you're going to miss what you had?"

They had finished eating and Sara settled on one end of the sofa and sipped at her coffee. Michael Ryan was so easy to talk to and he seemed to understand.

"I don't know how to explain this to you, Michael, but I've always had everything. There was nothing I wanted that wasn't bought for me. No toys that I coveted, no clothes, no cars, nothing that wasn't provided. I had unlimited cash to spend."

Michael knew what she was driving at. She assumed he'd never had anything. He let her continue with that assumption.

"I can't imagine that."

"Well, it really isn't much fun. There isn't anything to reach for, if you know what I mean. So . . . I guess I just went in the opposite direction."

"Obviously you didn't hit the skids," he commented.

"No, but I could've easily enough. My so-called friends and I traveled in a pack, living only for the moment, trying outrageous things to entertain ourselves. None of us had any purpose in life."

"What made you change?"

Sara gave him a tight smile. "The morning after I got pregnant . . ."

"Wait a minute." Michael smiled at her. "How did you know you got pregnant that one night?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was ESP or something, but I just knew." She leveled a stare at him. "I'd never been to bed with anyone before that."

"With all the other things you'd done, you never tried sex?"

Sara giggled. "Silly, isn't it? But for some reason that never appealed to me. Besides, I'd never met anyone I wanted to sleep with."

"But you made an exception that one time? Did you love him?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then why, Sara?"

She was silent for a long time. "He said he loved me."

"He couldn't have been the first man to say that to you."

"He was. Actually, he was the first *person* ever to say that at all."

"Not your parents?" Whatever else Michael'd had in his life, or not had, he'd always known his parents loved him.

"No. We aren't the most loving of families. Besides, I was an unexpected and unwanted child. Then when I caused my parents so much trouble, and was an embarrassment to my brother and sister, well . . ."

"How do you know that? That you were unwanted?"

"Honesty is one of the backbones of the Thorne family. It doesn't take a Rhodes scholar to figure it out. They made too many remarks and alluded too often to the time gap between me and my siblings."

"You poor kid."

"Don't feel sorry for me. I've been given a rare opportunity here, and in my own perverse way, I'm enjoying it."

Michael replenished her coffee and poured himself another glass of wine. Sara'd refused the wine earlier because of her pregnancy. When he came back into the room, she was huddled in the corner of the sofa and looked cold.

"Are you chilly?"

"A little, yes."

He got the down-filled blue comforter from his bed and tucked it around her and took his place in the easy chair facing her again. She made a lovely picture cuddled in the pink shirt and the puffy blue cover. She also looked vulnerable. Those protective feelings washed over him again.

"What made you think you were pregnant?"

"I figured my luck would just run that way. The first time, you know." She smiled at him.

"What did you do?"

"I waited three weeks and took one of those early pregnancy tests. It was positive."

"And then?"

"I went to our beach house in Malibu alone and did some straight thinking. You've probably worked all your life so maybe you can't really understand this, but I admitted that my life was truly wasteful and I was on a downhill run if I didn't do something drastic. I was almost positive that my family wouldn't be supportive and that I only had myself to rely on."

"I can understand that."

Sara's hand eased gently over her stomach. "And I had the baby to consider." Her expressive blue eyes met Michael's. "It was mind boggling."

"Abortion never entered your mind?"

"No."

"Or marriage to the father?"

"Never. He was equally rich and well on his way to becoming an alcoholic. I wouldn't want to live with that and certainly wouldn't subject a child to it," she said adamantly.

"You're very brave, Sara."

She smiled at him. "I don't think of it as bravery, more like taking control of my life. I've always lived just on the surface and never delved into anything. Making all these decisions, managing my own money—money I've earned—makes me feel good."

Michael noted that she was tired when she sighed and leaned back into the warm nest she'd fashioned in his comforter. How very different their lives had been. While she'd lived on the surface, he felt as if he'd been below the surface all his life. With tunnel vision, he'd plotted and planned his every move, arranged his entire life to get to the top of his organization.

"You look tired," he said when he saw her nodding and stifling a yawn.

"One of the problems of early pregnancy, so the books say," she replied. "I'd better go. It was a nice dinner, Michael. Thank you." She pushed the cover aside and got up.

"We'll do it again," he said, opening the door for her.

"Good night, Michael."

He didn't reply as he watched her unlock her door and disappear inside.

For almost twenty years, Michael had been attentive to the subtleties of deception and sub rosa activities. When he got up the next morning, he was full of ideas

to direct those skills toward Sara Thorne.

On a legal pad he listed titles—Food, Transportation, Entertainment, Clothing—then itemized what his options might be under each heading. There was a growing list of things he had to do, but it was exhilarating to him. While mentally calling it a Master Plan, he knew it would change daily depending on Sara's reactions.

He started clipping a few coupons out of the Sunday newspaper for items he might possibly use. The rest of the pages he gathered and took to Sara. It was her day to work late so he knew she was home.

"I thought you might want these," he said when she opened the door.

"That's nice of you." Her eyes lit up at the cents-off coupons.

"I'm on my way out, can I give you a lift to work?"

"No, I'd better walk. I need the exercise, but thanks."

"See you later," he said, giving her a short wave as he rounded to the edge of the stairs.

Sara watched him descend the steps in his tight fitting jeans and nylon wind-breaker jacket. Sunlight from the stairwell window gleamed on his dark curly hair before he disappeared from her view. Last night they'd talked only of her life and she realized she knew little about his. She'd have to ask if she got the opportunity. There had to be some reason a good looking man like him wasn't married.

Michael anticipated her curiosity and spent most of the afternoon in junk shops searching out old magazines with extremely boring articles on everything from personal time management to business forecasts. He found a goodly collection and was pleased with his day's work. At a newsstand, he found a current business monthly that was beginning a series of corporate articles. This was going to be

his ace in the hole and a good explanation for his supposedly new found wealth.

After eating his dinner, he tried to relax by watching television, but he kept thinking about Sara walking home after she got off work at nine o'clock. By eight-thirty, he couldn't stand it any longer and went to get her in the car.

She smiled when he casually came into the store carrying a bag of groceries. "What brings you here?"

"I needed some things and I had an unbelievable desire for some ice cream," he prevaricated. He could tell she understood by the light in her eyes.

"What flavor?"

"Macadamia nut brittle. Haagen Daz. Do you like it?"

"I like any kind of ice cream, it's one of my weaknesses."

"Good. If you'll make us some coffee when we get home, I'll share with you." She was tired again; circles rimmed her pretty blue eyes.

Sara was glad for the ride home. The free brochures she'd received at the clinic had mentioned the fatigue of early pregnancy, but she hadn't expected to feel quite this worn out. Michael followed her into her apartment and insisted he'd make the coffee and get the ice cream in bowls. Sara didn't give him any argument. It felt good to be waited on for a change.

But she rallied when they were eating. "Why are you doing all this for me, Michael?"

"All what?"

"Coming to get me, offering me dinner last night, meals on Sunday, ice cream tonight."

"Do I have to have some ulterior motive?" He grinned at her.

"It just seems strange."

"I need a friend, Sara. Don't you think we could be friends?"

"That's all?"

"That's all. No lifetime commitments,

no seduction, just friends." He'd anticipated this question, just not so soon.

"Okay."

"It's time you got to bed, you look beat. What day do you have off this week?"

"Thursday."

"Do you have any plans?"

"Not really. What did you have in mind?"

"I'm not sure yet, but plan to spend the day with me, would you?" He picked up the empty bowls and rinsed them out in the sink then picked up his jacket and headed toward the door.

"That sounds nice. Good night."

"Good night, Sara."

Sara didn't see Michael all day Wednesday and she was strangely disappointed. He knocked on her door early on Thursday morning.

"I've got some great news," he said on his way into her sparse living room. "I've sold a series of articles to a magazine and I got my first check yesterday."

"That's wonderful, Michael."

"You've brought me luck," he said with a grin. "Now I can move out of these horrible apartments."

"Where do you think you'll go?" She was trying to be enthusiastic because he seemed so happy about his news. But she was saddened that he would be leaving.

"I'm going to buy a house. I thought you might go with me today to look at some."

"That would be fun."

And it was. They met with a realtor and drove through various neighborhoods, stopping to tour six houses. Since she was along only as an adviser, Sara felt free to express her opinions about each residence when Michael asked. Considering how both of them currently lived, she was rather surprised at his conservative taste in both structure and furnishings. And even more so when it coincided with hers.

Michael insisted on dinner out that evening after their long day.

"Did you see any house today you really liked?" she questioned once they were seated.

"Not particularly. Did you?"

"It's not my choice, Michael."

Michael dropped the subject and expounded on the articles he'd sold when she asked. He'd spent most of Wednesday at the library reading articles about writers—their habits, their methods and their ways of living. He was quite an expert on his new pretend profession. Subtle questioning of Sara let him know she had no idea how writers lived or worked. That made his lies easier to tell.

Their days fell into a regular pattern. Supposedly, Michael wrote during the day while Sara was at work, but many days he came to the gift shop, claiming writer's block, just to keep her company, most of the time bringing lunch for both of them. He always came to get her on the nights she worked late.

Halloween passed and Michael helped her change the display window, doing all the heavy work. He even waited on customers when she took a quick trip to the ladies room. He questioned her extensively about the business and locked the information away in his analytical mind.

The weather turned cold in early November and Michael was upset when he saw Sara leave the apartment complex without a winter coat on. When she'd left him the key to her unit for the plumber, he'd had a duplicate made so he entered her domain to see what size clothes she wore.

He shopped that day for a winter coat for her, found what he thought she'd like, then took it home and tried to figure out how he could give it to her without making an issue of it. Nothing came to his mind so he started reading the business

want ads again looking for something to buy. A chance notice caught his eye.

A thrift store needed donations. Michael laughed out loud. He'd found his solution. Just to be sure, however, he made a trip to the location to check out their inventory and prices. Pleased with his knowledge, he went back to his apartment and removed a button from the front of the new coat, then dabbed red wine near the hem to create a stain. He couldn't wait for Sara to get home.

"Come have dinner with me," he said when Sara got to the top of the steps.

"Oh, Michael, you are so tempting. I'm starved and haven't made any plans for dinner. What can I do for you in exchange for all these meals?"

Again, Michael had anticipated that his generosity couldn't go on forever without being questioned. "I'll let you do my laundry."

"Would you? Really?"

Michael laughed at her enthusiasm. "Not many women would find that thrilling, Sara."

"Probably not," she laughed as she spoke, "but it would let me feel like I was reciprocating in some way."

They ate the dinner he'd prepared and over coffee, he told her he had a surprise for her.

"A surprise for me? Why?"

"I noticed you don't have a winter coat and you're going to need one."

"You *didn't* buy me a coat, Michael!"

"Well . . . sort of. I was downtown today buying some folders for some new stuff I've written and I walked past a thrift store. Out of curiosity, I went in."

"Michael . . ."

"Let me explain before you get angry. I just happened to see a rack of clothes and I browsed through them. I thought you could use a coat." He'd opened a closet and produced a gray down filled coat. "It's missing a button and there's a small

stain on the bottom, but I hoped you could use it. It was only ten dollars, Sara," he explained when he saw the look on her face. He held it out for her to try on. It fit exactly.

"You shouldn't have done this. I want to pay you for it."

"Fair enough."

"Thank you," she said, hugging the warm fabric to her.

Michael grinned at her pleasure and took the ten dollars.

The business broker found a few enterprises for Michael to look at, but none of them were to his liking. He toured houses while Sara worked, but again didn't see anything he liked.

As surreptitiously as he could, he took care of Sara. He provided lunches often and helped her in the store as the days got busier during the holiday season. Setting up the Christmas displays of gift wrap and candles was much too exhausting work for her, he thought, so he toted and fetched as she directed.

And he let her do little things for him. He claimed total ignorance of ironing his shirts, which he'd previously sent to a laundry. After laboriously removing buttons from a couple of shirts, he maintained he couldn't sew and asked Sara if she would try to replace them.

Glad to be able to help, she awkwardly ironed and sewed, laughing with Michael about her lack of knowledge about these tasks.

And then there was the baby.

Ever the researcher, Michael spent time at the library reading about parenting, prenatal care and the birth process itself. From this knowledge, he knew what Sara should be eating and planned menus accordingly. On her days off, he insisted they go shopping, claiming that walking in a shopping mall was as good exercise as

walking outside.

While his inclination was to buy her attractive, expensive maternity clothes, he tamped those desires and took her to every factory outlet and used clothing store they could locate. She was very judicious in what she bought with her limited funds, choosing inexpensive separates she could coordinate for the duration.

It was an easy friendship. Michael continued to lie to her about his writing career and never discussed his finances with her. Only gradually did he let slip that he'd sold an article or invested his earnings. Sara was no fool. She'd questioned him about the price of the houses he'd looked at. He'd grinned and said that was what mortgages were for and he'd only be making a minimal down payment.

By Thanksgiving day, Sara was beginning to show and converted to maternity clothes. When Michael saw her walk in the apartment wearing a loose smock, he was speechless.

Sara laughed. "Didn't you know I was pregnant?"

"I knew because you told me. This somehow makes it a reality."

"Oh, it's a reality, all right! Something smells good, may I come in?"

Michael stepped aside and let her enter. Seeing her in maternity clothes unnerved him. They hadn't done too much talking about the baby or her pregnancy since that first night they'd had dinner together. Now she *looked* really pregnant for the first time. He didn't know why he was so concerned about it, but he was. Mostly because his reaction was to shelter her, protect her, hold her:

"Michael, are you okay?" Sara asked when he didn't say anything.

"Yeah, sure, I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be?" He cleared his mind and excused himself to go to the kitchen.

"Can I help in any way?" Sara was right at his heels.

"No, go sit down. Take a load off your feet. Everything's almost done." He wanted to be alone for a couple minutes. The thoughts that were coursing through his mind were crazy. Insane.

Taught as a child to cook, then living as a bachelor for all these years, he didn't have to pay too much attention to what he was doing. A turkey dinner was a matter of routine. As he basted the turkey, peeled potatoes, and opened a can of cranberry sauce, he mulled over the truth of what he'd discovered when he'd seen Sara in her maternity top.

He'd fallen in love with Sara Thorne.

The Master Plan hadn't accounted for this eventuality. Emotions hadn't been considered. Certainly falling in love with her, loving her, wanting her love had never crossed his mind. All he'd started out to do was be kind to her. Protect her in some nebulous way. What *had* he been thinking as he'd made those silly plans?

"Michael?"

Why hadn't he ever noticed how melodious her voice was before?

"Yeah?"

"Did you ever find those articles you wrote and promised you'd show me?"

This, of course, he'd planned. He went to his bedroom and got the back issues of the magazines he'd bought in the junk shops. He grinned at her when he handed her the beat up magazines.

"I've marked the articles with a paper clip."

Her blue eyes smiled up at him. "Did you think I wouldn't recognize your name in the table of contents?"

Faking surprise, he said, "I thought I'd told you I never write under my real name." God knew that was the truth!

"Why not?"

He went into a lengthy explanation which was verbatim from a writer's article he'd read, then finished with, "I'll use my own name on a full length novel, if I ever

have one published."

Sara seemed content with that information and got involved in looking at what he'd given her. Michael retreated to the kitchen.

So he was in love with her. Now what? Propose marriage? Totally out of the question. Live together? Never. He put the finishing touches on the meal and relegated this problem to the back of his mind. He'd need a lot of time to solve this one.

Their meal was pleasant because Michael forced himself to mask his feelings and become the general good guy Sara knew him to be. They laughed a great deal, as they always did. He teased her and she giggled, and they made plans for him to help her the next day at the gift shop, the busiest day of the year in that business.

While they'd touched casually from time to time, in a very non-personal way, Michael couldn't resist kissing her lightly on the cheek when he walked her across the hall that evening.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Sara," he said softly.

"You, too, Michael," she whispered.

Sara was up early the next morning, not having slept very well. She'd had a very sexy dream about Michael. It was strange the way he'd kissed her the evening before. Don't be silly, Sara, she admonished, it was a holiday. Lots of people who normally wouldn't show any emotion kissed on holidays. Her family always did in a perfunctory manner, every Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's.

But the lingering softness of his lips on her cheek and the scent of his masculine cologne stayed with her.

To all outward appearances, Michael wasn't any different in his approach to Sara. While she wasn't as tired now as

she'd been in her first trimester, nonetheless the increased volume at the gift shop was telling on her and Michael came to her rescue. He went with her every day and stayed during her shift, driving her both ways.

He moved displays and insisted on getting their lunch. He bought a stool and made her sit on it during lulls. When she'd been on her feet too long, and they were puffy, he'd fix a solution for her to soak in. He continued to prepare most of their meals in the evenings and he'd cover her snugly with a blanket and let her sleep on his sofa when she was tired.

He asked nothing of her in return, but when she balked at his ministrations, he'd think of some trivial task that would mollify her for the moment.

But none of it was without cost to him.

So he made a new plan.

In his "therapy," he'd been told to lead a normal life, to put the past behind him, forget about it and get on with living. And as long as he had only himself to consider, that had seemed the thing to do. But his feelings for Sara had changed all that. He couldn't ask her to share his life.

Michael'd made difficult choices before, but they were frivolous by comparison to the decision he made about Sara.

Knowing that she needed him, he determined that he'd stay with her through the birth of her baby.

Then he'd just disappear.

He'd done it before, he could do it again.

When he went out to get lunch one day close to Christmas, he went into Sara's apartment with his purloined key and took one of her deposit slips from her checkbook. When he left, he'd deposit a substantial amount of money for her so she wouldn't be in such dire straits. He didn't think he could exist in Boise, Idaho knowing she was living like a pauper. What the

hell good was that money to him anyway? Perhaps he'd have some consolation from his generosity.

His plans made, Michael conditioned himself to enjoy the next months with Sara. It was going to be all he'd ever have to remember and he was going to make the most of it.

When Mrs. Durand surprised Sara with a generous Christmas bonus she insisted on taking Michael out to dinner. He accepted graciously since it meant so much to her. The next day they bought a Christmas tree and spent the afternoon decorating it in Sara's apartment.

Michael threw caution to the winds in his gifts for Sara. Even if she was angry with him all day because of it, he was determined to get her some things she needed.

She protested, of course, but was pleased with the selection of baby clothing and paraphernalia he'd gotten. It was hard to argue with a man who said, "My happiness this Christmas was buying these things for you." After their exchange of gifts and a lavish dinner Michael'd prepared, they sat on her battered sofa in the glow of the Christmas tree lights and talked about baby names until Sara fell asleep.

Michael carried her to her bed, kissed her gently and whispered, "I love you," before covering her and leaving. It was damn near the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life.

After the new year, the after-Christmas sale at the gift shop, and the display of Valentines had been set up, Michael didn't go to the gift shop as frequently with Sara. She was planning her trip to Washington, D.C. with Mrs. Durand and was excited about it.

"How long will you be gone?" Michael asked.

"Four days. We'll leave on Saturday

and see the show on Sunday and Monday and drive back on Tuesday."

After she'd repeated what Mrs. Durand had told her about the show, Michael looked concerned.

"It sounds like you're going to be on your feet a lot."

"Michael Ryan, you're turning into a regular old mother hen about me! Pregnancy isn't the end of life as we know it. I feel fine."

"Promise me you'll rest if you get tired, will you?"

"Oh, Michael!"

"Promise."

"Okay, okay, I promise!" Sara couldn't be anything but flattered that he showed so much concern for her. Michael had become very important to her in the last few months and he asked so very little of her in return for what he did.

He carried her luggage to Mrs. Durand's car, meeting Sara's boss for the first time.

"I'll miss you," Sara said quickly as she was about to get into the car. She'd had the strangest foreboding all that morning that Michael wouldn't be there when she got back.

"I'll miss you, too," he said stoically.

"You'll be here when I come back?"

Michael smiled. "Of course."

Sara smiled a genuine smile for the first time that day.

Although the gift show was exciting and her contributions were appreciated by Mrs. Durand, Sara was unbelievably lonely without Michael. She thought about him constantly. His slow smile: The way he teased her about her questionable household skills. How he fixed meals she enjoyed. That kiss at Thanksgiving. How she'd dreamed of having his arms around her. Never had she felt like this about a man.

No commitments, no seduction, just friends, that was what he said. And that's

the way it was. And was going to be. After all, she was carrying another man's child. That would have to be a turn-off for any man, even one of Michael's sensitivity.

Michael knew he'd looked out the window at least a hundred times waiting for Sara's return. When at last he saw Mrs. Durand's car pull up, he bounded from his apartment and took the stairs two at a time until he was outside. The weather had been foul with snow swirling and he'd been worried they'd have car trouble or be in an accident. He opened the door before Sara even had a chance. He offered his hand to help her, oblivious to the gratuitous smile from Mrs. Durand.

No one said a word as Michael and Sara looked at each other, blue eyes happy and questioning at the same time looking into relieved brown ones.

Michael cleared his throat. "I'm glad you're back."

"Me too," she breathed into the frosty air. Speaking had broken the cocoon-like feeling she'd just experienced of being alone with Michael. She gathered her senses and thanked Mrs. Durand, then walked hand in hand with Michael to the apartment building.

"How was the show?"

Sara told him of all the things she'd seen and the gourmet meals she'd eaten. He'd fixed all her favorites for dinner and he listened attentively as she talked, a smile on his face.

In early February, Sara went to the clinic for her regular monthly appointment and had a handful of literature when she came back to Michael's car.

"What's all that?" he asked.

"Just about the birth process itself. I'd like to try natural childbirth, but I don't think that's feasible."

"Why not?"

"It's really better if you know all about

the breathing and the pacing and stuff."

"Can't you read up on that?"

"I'd have to take Lamaze classes."

"So?"

"I can't do it alone, Michael," she said, grinning at him.

Michael didn't comment. He'd be more than happy to help her, but he didn't know how that would be received. He'd read all about natural childbirth in his research and he knew she'd have to have a partner, one who would be there through the birth itself.

He'd allowed himself time to think about it and three days later at dinner, he reopened the subject of Lamaze training.

"If you really want to do the Lamaze thing, Sara, I'll be your partner," he said quietly, as he watched her eat the creamy fettucini he'd prepared for her.

Her blue eyes flew to his and her hand reached out for his. "That's a lot to ask from a friend."

Michael somehow managed to speak around the lump in his throat. "I didn't hear you ask."

The next week they went to their first class. The instructor assumed all her students were spouses; she noted, smilingly, that they should already be familiar with each other's bodies. Sara and Michael both reddened considerably but eased the moment with smiles.

The first exercise was the most difficult for Sara and Michael to overcome. Lying flat on her back, she had to tense only one muscle and Michael had to find it by touching her all over. His actions were tentative at first, but he was encouraged by Sara's smile.

At the end of the first session, they were given literature and elementary exercises to practice at home together. Michael didn't realize until the cold breeze hit him outside that he had been sweating profusely during the class. His libido had taken a beating during the exercises when he'd

touched Sara for the first time. But that was compounded by the realization half way through that he wished he was going to be the father of Sara's baby.

Terrific! Not only was he in love with her, now he wanted to father her child:

Sara's body continued to expand and Michael noticed every inch. He was extra sensitive to her fatigue and her eating habits. He pampered her in little ways by making sure she was warm enough, ate right, had everything she needed and got enough rest. He worked in the card shop to help her.

Sara had given up protesting. It was hard to remember the staid, almost morose Michael Ryan she'd first met. Through his association with her, he'd become much more outgoing, teasing and talkative. She sensed he enjoyed helping her in the card shop. And the truth was, she enjoyed having him with her.

Once he'd made the decision to leave after the baby was born, Michael no longer had any interest in looking for a house. When Sara asked him why he'd stopped searching, he had no ready explanation. She told him how much she enjoyed looking at the houses and it was one of the few things she could help him with after he'd done so much for her. Not wanting Sara to get suspicious, he set up an appointment with the realtor. So far they'd seen nothing that either of them had particularly liked, so Michael thought it was a harmless ruse.

Until a day in mid-March when the realtor took them to a house in the Hunting Hills section of Roanoke. Had Michael seriously been looking for a house, it would've been ideal for him. But Sara's reaction was overwhelming. With her usual enthusiasm, she pointed out numerous things she liked about the house . . . the size of the rooms, the gourmet kitchen, the first floor utility room and the screened-in porch.

"But this is probably too big for you, isn't it, Michael?" she asked, her eyes darting to other features.

Nonplussed, Michael prevaricated with, "I'm looking for an investment."

So Sara went blithely through the structure, expanding ideas about how he could use the space for his writing. Michael followed her and the realtor and commented only when he had to. He'd lied to Sara consistently; this he regretted more than anything else. Sara really liked the house. And more than anything else in the world he wanted to buy it for her and live in it with her.

Sara and Michael became adept students in the Lamaze classes, and soon were receiving praise from the instructor about their ease with each other.

Sara grinned and whispered, "If she only knew."

Michael returned her grin. "Who would've believed I'd be a good coach? Come on, Sara, take a deep breath . . . that's it . . . breath out . . . slow . . . pant . . . pant . . . pant."

And so it went. The classes were completed two weeks before Sara's due date.

Sara made meticulous arrangements for the birth of her baby. She discussed time payments with the hospital and the doctor; she found a woman to babysit. With the things Michael'd bought for Christmas for the baby and with those items they'd found on sale, she had a meager, but adequate layette.

She felt wonderful and despite Michael's protests, she insisted on working until the last minute. He'd nearly bitten the end of his tongue off not to argue with her when she commented she needed the money.

The actual birth was nothing like the movies or television depicted. There was no hurrying or scurrying about, forgotten suitcases or panicking at the last minute.

Sara and Michael were having dinner Sunday evening in his apartment when he saw a strange look cross her face.

"Sara, honey, are you all right?" The endearment had slipped out unnoticed.

Her hands went to her abdomen, then she looked up at him. "Michael, I think this is it."

He glanced at his watch as she grimaced in pain. Efficient as always, he settled her in his easy chair, then went across the hall to get her packed suitcase and coat. In a flash he was back just in time to see another look of pain cross her face.

"Deep breath, Sara . . . that's the way, in through your nose . . . that's it . . . out through your mouth." He kept up the litaney as he dialed the doctor, then called Mrs. Durand. He eased her out of the chair and bundled her coat around her. The pains were very close together for a first baby and he knew he had to get her to the hospital fast.

Sara clutched his hand tightly on their drive across town. "Michael . . . I . . ."

"Don't talk, Sara, save your energy."

"I'm scared," she whispered as he pulled up to the entrance to the Emergency Room.

"I know, honey, but I'm here. And I'll be with you through this, I promise."

Her eyes filled with tears. "What did I ever do to deserve a friend like you?"

Michael leaned over and kissed her cheek. She smiled and the moment passed.

Michael coached and supported and reminded her about the breathing during the whole process. His eyes never left her face and he held her hand when the contractions seized her. He encouraged her and counted the sequences of her pains and breathing. He even answered to "Mr. Thorne" when the nurses and the doctor spoke to him.

He whispered assurances and touched her lips lightly with a dampened tissue

when she complained of thirst. He pushed her sweaty blond hair off her face and smiled at her.

Even when they heard the squall of a newborn baby, he held fast to her hand. She never released him during the bonding when the cleansed baby was put on her stomach and she touched her for the first time.

"Oh, Michael, it's a girl," she panted, exhausted from her efforts.

"And she's beautiful, Sara, just like you," he said, tears in his eyes. It was a poignant moment, and one he knew he'd be eternally grateful he'd shared with Sara.

After seeing Sara settled and sound asleep, Michael went back to his apartment. Too emotionally strung out to sleep, he organized his plans for Sara and uncovered his new typewriter for the first time.

By the time he was finished, the blustery night of Sara's daughter's birthday gave way to a sunshiny Monday morning. By ten o'clock, his personal items were packed, his clothing in suitcases or hanging in his car. He'd left all bed linens, household supplies and canned food at Sara's along with his expensive coffee maker and other small appliances she didn't have.

From his extra bedroom he moved a crib, baby clothes, toys, boxes of disposable diapers, a play pen and a bathinet he'd purchased for her. As he arranged the items in her small living room, his chest was tight with emotion. Dammit! He wanted that baby to be his, too!

A few phone calls later and a trip to see the apartment manager, Mrs. Davis, and he was ready to go. On his way to Boise, Idaho.

Every detail thought out and his car loaded, he had only one stop to make: he had to see Sara.

"Hi, Michael!" Sara greeted him with a grin.

She was sitting up in the hospital bed in a rose and ecru lace peignoir that Michael knew she'd brought from California.

"Good morning," he said with a forced smile.

"Did you see the baby?"

He knew she would ask that and he was ready for it. "No, I wanted to see how you were doing first." He failed to mention that he never intended to see the baby after last night.

"I'm fine. I don't know what I expected, but I feel wonderful."

"That's good."

"Did you call Mrs. Durand?"

Michael grinned, realizing she hadn't remembered the events of the night before. "Last night."

"Oh."

"Sara, I . . ."

"Something's wrong, isn't it?"

He'd walked to the window, his back toward her. "I'm leaving, Sara." He pulled an envelope from his inner jacket pocket.

"For how long?"

"A long time." Why the hell couldn't he just say "forever?" The silence from her side of the room finally made him turn around and walk to the end of her bed. Although she was fighting tears, the tell-tale evidence rolled silently down her pink cheeks.

"Well . . . it was fun, wasn't it? I . . . I appreciate all you did for me, Michael. Really I do." She reached for a tissue and dabbed at her eyes. She didn't look up at him.

Michael laid the envelope on the foot of her bed. "After I leave, I want you to read this, Sara."

No reply.

Michael shuffled, then cut his losses and took long strides to the door.

"Goodbye, Sara."

The hospital parking lot wasn't crowded at noon on a Monday in late March and for that Michael was thankful. It was bad enough that he was sitting behind the wheel of his car with his head in his hands and his eyes full of tears. He certainly didn't need an audience.

Scene after scene with Sara played through his mind. It was like a video tape, one that wouldn't stop.

He'd taken care of her for the last six months. Her future was secure. Why didn't he just leave? Run away. Cop out. He was good at that. He'd sold out twice before in his life. Shouldn't the third time be easier?

When the door thudded behind Michael, Sara began crying in earnest, letting the tears flow and gasping to get her breath. The nurse came in and found her like that, her body wracked with crying.

"There, there, Mrs. Thorne, this will pass," the nurse soothed, assuming postpartum depression.

Sara didn't answer so the nurse sat with her until the crying slowed, then suggested Sara rest until feeding time later in the afternoon. Before she left, she dimmed the lights and pulled the shades on the windows.

Michael found her like that—lying in the semi-darkness, tear stains on her cheeks and his envelope clutched unopened in her hand.

"Sara . . ." he said softly.

She turned to face him, no emotion showing.

"I owe you an explanation."

"I thought you left."

"I should. Do you want to hear what I have to say or should I go?"

"I want to hear it."

Michael sat on the edge of her bed and took one of her hands in his. "It's a long story, and not too pretty."

"Tell me."

"I've lied to you from the beginning. I'm no writer and I didn't come to Roanoke by accident."

"What are you then?"

"An accountant. A CPA. I'm in the Federal Witness Protection Program. I'm a hunted man, Sara. By the mob."

"You're kidding!" Sara sat up in the bed, her eyes enormous in her ashened face.

"I wish I were. When I graduated from college, I was recruited by the FBI and asked to infiltrate one branch of the mob. I had family ties, an uncle, so it was easy to get in."

"Michael Ryan isn't your name." It was a statement.

"No, and I can't tell you what my name was." He gave her a humorless smile. "I'm not even Irish."

"You actually worked for the mob?"

"For seventeen years, until I'd worked myself to the top of the organization and was trusted completely. Until I had all the information the FBI needed to make a clean sweep."

"I think I read about it in the paper. Sometime last year?" she asked.

"Yes, last June. When the bosses went on vacation to Florida, I gave the FBI the information. Then I disappeared. They provided me with a new identity and gave me my choice of places to live. I have an impeccable new background and probably will never be found."

"Is that how you knew my father?"

"Yes, the mob tried to strong-arm him a couple of times, but he resisted their efforts. That should make you proud of him," Michael tried smiling again.

"Why did you do it?"

"I was young and idealistic, I guess. Thought I could change the world a little. It's hard to remember now. My parents were dead. What they were offering to pay no doubt figured into it. And maybe

some sense of patriotic duty, too." Her hand tightened on his.

Sara had a thousand unanswered questions about what he'd done, but she wanted to know more about now.

"Why did you come back?"

"I don't know. You'd be so much better off without knowing me, Sara. It's dangerous to be involved with me."

"I don't feel the slightest bit in danger. Why did you really come back?"

Michael stared at the concerned look on her face. She deserved the truth.

"Because I want you. And the baby. I want to marry you and buy that house we like. Find something to do here and take care of you."

"I hear a but in there."

"But it's not that easy, Sara. I'm very restricted in what I can do, where I can go."

"For instance?"

"If you married me, I couldn't ever go visit your parents in L.A. No vacations to major cities or big resorts, no sightseeing with our children in Washington, D.C., things like that. I don't have to hide out, but I do have to keep a low profile. That's a lot to ask."

Blatantly truthful, Sara said, "Are you asking?"

Michael dropped her hand and stood up. Suddenly he realized he'd done the easy part.

"You have no reason to stay with me, Sara. You can go back to L.A. now, easily explain away a marriage, a divorce and the baby. You would be accepted again. Have everything you want." He raked his fingers through his curly hair.

"It just may be that what I want is standing in this room agonizing about asking me to marry him." Sara's voice was laced with humor, but Michael couldn't detect it.

"Don't be impetuous, Sara, it's not that easy. I'm a wanted man, not for anything I

did wrong, but I could get killed just the same if they ever find me."

"So?"

"Sara, for God's sake, don't you understand how serious this is? What kind of a man I am?"

"You're kind and gentle, caring and generous, loving and faithful. How much more should I know? Or even care about?" Her voice had modulated over the various words.

"There's something else you should know. I called your father this morning and he and your mother are coming here."

"Marvelous." Her voice was deadpan.

"They want you to come home."

"Did you tell them about yourself?" she asked.

"No, I shouldn't have even told you. I said I was a neighbor of yours."

"I don't understand you, Michael! With one hand you're pushing me away, back to my parents and California, and with the other you pull me to you and say you want to marry me. Could you accept being a

father to another man's child?"

Michael's dark eyes met hers. Total honesty was required. "Other than not being the biological father, I think of your baby as mine. I could love her as my own."

Despite all he'd told her, Sara knew she was talking to the most honest person she'd ever met and her heart filled with love for him.

"Would it make any difference if I said I have no desire to go back to California, that I love you, and want to marry you?"

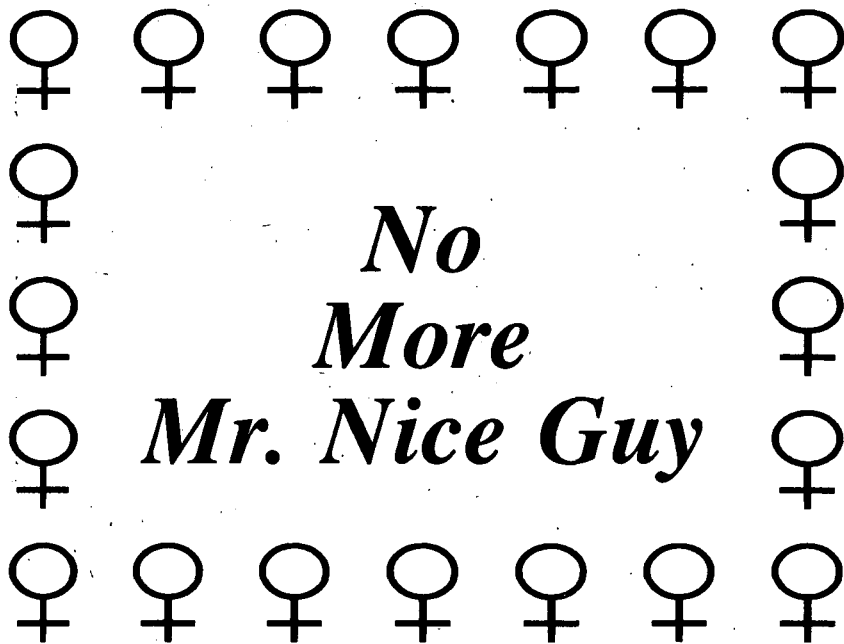
Michael stared at her, no expression on his face. Then a small smile formed, spreading into a jubilant grin.

"Hell, yes, it would," he said, sitting on the side of her bed and pulling her into his arms. He hugged, kissed and caressed her for long moments, then arched back to look at her. "I love you, Sara Thorne, so very much." Tears misted his eyes.

Her own eyes damp, Sara grinned at him. "I love you, too, Michael Ryan . . . or whatever your name is." ♥



Scabiosa



No More Mr. Nice Guy

*Alan Smith was a wonderful guy, and Carroll was deeply in love with him. But sometimes she wished he were a little less cautious
And predictable. Then her wish came true!*

—JEANNE GRANT—

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“Whoops!” If she hadn’t been precariously balancing a tray of champagne glasses, Carroll would have been happy to disappear from the kitchen again. As it was, she set the tray hastily on the counter with a rattling plunk. “I swear there isn’t a room in the house safe from the two of you!”

Stephane, her sister’s new fiance, removed his hands from Nancy long enough to offer a bold grin. Nancy just chuckled. “I can’t control him,” she confessed.

That Carroll already knew. Certainly a houseful of people hadn’t inhibited Stephane’s amorous behavior where her sister was concerned.

It didn’t matter. All that mattered to Carroll was that beneath the sophisticated trappings of red silk and a frothy hairstyle, Nancy was glowing.

Nancy was also leaving, with a not very subtle wink at Stephane. “This is probably the only chance my two favorite people are going to have to get to know each other

in this madhouse," she said deliberately. Seconds later, the door to the dining room was swinging shut behind her.

Silence swept through the kitchen on the backswing. Carroll covered it by immediately and noisily filling her mother's sink with sudsy water. Normally comfortable with people, she was finding it strangely difficult to feel at ease with her future brother-in-law.

Twenty-four hours ago, Nancy had simply flown in from Quebec with Stephane in tow. In itself, that wasn't surprising. Nance did everything whirlwind fashion, a characteristic she'd inherited from their mother. And while the two other Laker women panicked, Carroll had spent the afternoon between the store, telephone, and kitchen, organizing the impromptu engagement party that was now in full swing. Nothing to it, really. Carroll had always been the practical one in the family. Being practical suited her. Being itchy-restless and irritable as she'd been all this evening certainly didn't, but banishing the odd mood was somehow harder with Stephane standing there.

The small city of Lafayette, Indiana, didn't raise men like Stephane, she thought. Men who looked as if they'd been born in tuxedos. Men with deliciously wild eyes. Men who exuded virility with the simple act of breathing.

"You're surviving meeting every Laker relative from here to Poughkeepsie?" she asked lightly.

"Not Aunt Harriet."

"No one survives Aunt Harriet," she assured him.

"Then, too, my Nance does have her share of third cousins," Stephane added dryly, tipping a glass of champagne to his lips. "On the other hand, you and your parents are the only ones who are really important to her."

"You're not worried, are you? You won over Mom and Dad in thirty seconds flat."

"Worried about your parents—no." Stephane's midnight-blue eyes slid over her with the skill of a man who knew women. Lots of women. Carroll felt her cream-colored angora sweater and gray slacks promptly stripped and a naked twenty-seven-year-old speech therapist revealed, right down to the dimple on her fanny. "But I think you've reserved judgment about me so far, haven't you, Carroll?"

His perception embarrassed her. She'd never meant to let on that he made her feel uncomfortable. "I hardly know you."

"We met hours ago," he reminded her. "Long enough to form a first impression."

Carroll dipped her hand in the water, but there wasn't a single glass left to be washed. She reached for the dish towel, not looking at him. "You brought my sister home dripping with diamonds . . ."

"Which didn't impress you in the slightest."

"No," she admitted.

Stephane laughed, throwing back his head. "I like you, Carroll—and I have every intention of making your sister happy. Truce?"

She hadn't been aware there was a war. She also hadn't been aware that he'd had any intention of suddenly leaning closer. His mouth touched hers; she tasted the dangerous flavor of an experienced kiss thief, caught the whiff of sandalwood and musk. When he straightened, his palm lingered a second on her chin. "Your sister's going to give me nothing but trouble, you know. You're the kind of woman I always wanted to fall in love with, but there you have it. She's the one—was, is, and will be. You can trust me, Carroll."

Wonderful, she thought dizzily.

Seconds later, Stephane left the kitchen. She knew darn well he'd meant nothing by the kiss. He'd already kissed half the women at the party. Some men were all dark hair, dark eyes, charm, and trou-

ble. Nance could handle him. Carroll shuddered at the thought of even trying. Still . . .

Guilt was wanting your toes to tingle when a strange man kissed you. Particularly when you intended to marry another man.

She looked down at her hands, the same hands that seemed intent on drying and redrying themselves on the kitchen towel. Tossing the towel aside, she took a breath, and desperately wanted Alan.

But instead of searching him out, she ducked into the bathroom down the hall, whisked a lipstick from her purse, and bent toward the vanity mirror to apply it. Her reflection showed a frowning woman. It was an average sort of frown.

And the average frown was backed up by a half-dozen other average features . . . Spaniel-brown eyes, an oval face with delicately arched brows, spiked bangs, and a short, windswept hair style. Her hair color was sort of blond and sort of brown, almost streaky looking but nothing really striking. Decent figure, nothing special. To give herself credit, she had terrific skin . . . if a man waxed poetic over complexions. Carroll had never had a man wax poetic over anything about her, and would have been annoyed if one had.

She'd always liked her looks just fine. Anyway, mature adult women didn't want glib flattery. Mature adult women didn't want an Adonis who attracted other women like moths to a flame and took effusive public displays of affection for granted. They wanted a man they could count on through thick and thin. Carroll was a mature adult woman. Objectively, she had no interest in a relationship with a man like Stephane.

Unobjectively, and probably as a result of two glasses of champagne, she wished she could be less sensible for about thirty short minutes. No longer than that. She'd just like to be kidnapped by a swashbuck-

ling, womanizing, sexy hero-type for one quick fling before she settled down for good. The thought, of course, was idiotic, and promoted more guilt. Alan was absolutely everything she could want in a mate. Everything. It was just . . .

A rap on the door made her chin jerk up. Nancy's head popped in. Within seconds, her sister had perched on the edge of the porcelain tub just as she'd done a thousand times when they were growing up.

"Well? Did you two have a second to talk? You do like him, don't you, Carroll?"

Carroll dropped the lipstick into her purse and took a good look at Nancy's deliriously happy smile. "Of course I like him," she reassured.

Nancy sighed. "He's wildly romantic." The dreamy look on her face gradually drifted away. Her lightly penciled brows arched in a scolding frown. "But you didn't say a word in your letters about your Alan! Here you're practically at the altar yourself."

"He hasn't asked me," Carroll said hastily.

"He will. Caro, he seems like a wonderful man. I've been worried about you for so long . . ."

"Me?" Carroll said with surprise. No one ever worried about her. No one needed to, and that was how she liked it.

"You," her sister affirmed, and then grinned. "I certainly hope you're sleeping with him. And don't give me that look. For years you've needed a little good solid sin in your life."

"On a level with one-a-day vitamins?"

"Don't joke. You've always needed a man to whisk the caution right out from under you. Make you take down your hair . . ."

"That would be tough. I'm wearing it short."

"... sweep you right off your feet . . ."

"Sounds like a bruise on the rear end to

me."

Nancy stood up in a swirl of silk and Shalimar. "So you're not sleeping with him yet," she said sagely, in that patronizing tone of voice Carroll had nearly killed her for several times when they were teenagers. "Funny, I took one look at your Alan and figured him for a smart man."

"He is an extremely intelligent man."

"A sweetheart. I loved him on sight," Nancy affirmed. "I just figured he had more sense."

"We've only been seriously dating for the last couple of months," Carroll said irritably.

"And you've got him terrified into believing you have to be treated c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y. You've been doing that to men ever since I can remember."

"What on earth are you talking about? Is there something wrong with getting to know someone before you jump into bed with him?"

"Nope." Nancy flashed her mischievous smile and opened the door. "Only you've never held out on a man because of principles, Caro. In fact, I'll bet your fantasies are a thousand times wilder than mine. You just always intimidated the boys by being so good, I think you've got yourself fooled. Want me to explain all this to Alan?"

"If you want your funeral to precede your wedding."

"I was just going to tell him that it's all right to take off your halo," Nancy said in an injured tone.

Laughing, arms around each other, the sisters joined the party. Caro finally tracked Alan down in the den, trapped in a conversational circle with several young mothers—not surprisingly. Alan Smith was a pediatrician, and at every gathering they'd ever been to he was plucked for free advice.

One look at him and she told herself she felt safe again. Alan was the kind of man

whom a stranger instinctively trusted. He was also the kind of man who reached back and enclosed her hand in his when he couldn't possibly have seen her come up behind him. Security was the hello-again of his five fingers laced between hers.

Alan was just a good man, and it showed in everything about him. His voice was deep and quiet, with the soothing quality of heated brandy on an icy day. He wasn't overly tall; his Brooks Brothers suit was inevitably gray, and his conservative tie was inevitably just a little askew. Warm brown hair framed clean-cut, square features. He moved quietly, like the man he was, and his dark blue eyes always seemed to hold a smile. At thirty-three, he already had a network of fine lines around his eyes, character lines that reflected the compassion, intelligence, and patience that were so much a part of him.

Heaven knew Alan had been patient with her. They'd known each other for six months and had been seriously dating for two. No man waited that long without pressing to sleep with a woman. Why should he? Any female in her right mind would have said yes long before this.

And Carroll had wanted to say yes, except that these last two months, when he gently steered the conversation toward houses and children; she knew that an invitation to bed was an invitation to marriage as well. Alan wasn't the type to play games. He was the type to love and be loved, and Carroll did love him. She'd never wanted a wild seducer with wicked eyes; she'd never wanted a Stephane. She wanted the warmth of a fire, not the burn of it.

So why on earth was she still holding back from him?

Alan turned, finally able to separate himself from the others. He flashed her a smile that was uniquely Alan, warm and reassuring. She smiled back, yet that

strange panic suddenly assaulted her full force. The "something" was wrong with her, not Alan; she knew that. But knowing that didn't make it go away. As if a black cat had darted in front of her, she had the sudden urge to hold on tighter, to hurry-hurry them both away from the crowd before something terrible could happen.

She did no such thing, of course. "I didn't mean to desert you for so long," she said lightly. "My sister sidetracked me and—"

"Of course she did. You two haven't seen each other in months. I expected that."

And understood. Alan always understood. Understanding was such a rare quality in a man, but just once Carroll wished he were slightly less understanding and more inclined to steal her off to a corner and kiss her senseless. Of course, he did no such thing and the two of them easily mingled with the party crowd. An hour later Alan brought her coat and they went in search of Stephane and Nancy to say a last good night.

They discovered the engaged couple wrapped together in the hall just off the kitchen. Carroll exchanged an amused glance with Alan, but that odd feeling was there again. Standing next to Stephane and Nancy was like intruding on the radiance of fire. They shot sparks off each other that could light up a sky. Alan's gentle hand on her shoulder suddenly felt as exciting as flannel pajamas.

Which was an unfair, shallow comparison, cruel to Alan and completely unlike herself. *Carroll, can't you stop this? Please stop this.* . . .

But the nagging unease refused to disappear. Maybe Carroll had never wanted a roller coaster, but she was suddenly afraid to have missed the ride. In her heart and head, she didn't want an impatient and-demanding lover, she wanted the gentleness and compassion she knew she would find

with Alan. Still . . . just once in her life, just once, she would like to feel reckless and uninhibited and wanton, to know what it was like to feel wildly, crazily, insanely in love.



The next morning Alan dipped a brush into the old-fashioned shaving mug, and then methodically slathered the white foam on his cheeks and throat. A steaming mug of coffee sat on the bathroom vanity next to him. The smells of soap and steam and fresh-brewed coffee were part of the shaving ritual he rarely varied. This Tuesday morning was no different, except that when he lifted the razor to his throat, he glanced at his face in the mirror and abruptly set down the shaving tool.

His eyes were sick with worry. *You're losing her.*

The mirror didn't have much comfort to offer him. His looks just weren't the type to excite a woman. Children and dogs liked his face just fine. In fact, children and dogs followed him around on a regular basis . . . but not women. He had the face of a man who drove a conservative car, wore Brooks Brothers suits, took good care of his parents, and planned to live in a colonial house in the suburbs with 2.2 children and a swing set in the yard.

And that face was a map of the man he was. He liked kids and dogs. He liked his parents. He had no deep dark secrets, no dramatic past, no Paul Newman eyes or Robert Redford saunter to attract a woman. He'd never rushed a woman to bed who wasn't ready, and the first time he'd made love he had suffered more from nerves than his girl had.

None of that would have particularly bothered him, if it hadn't been for Carroll's odd mood the evening before. Truthfully, her unusual behavior hadn't surprised him. Probably he'd been waiting for the ax to begin falling for weeks. He'd seen her studying her sister's fiance

at the party, a man who couldn't be more his diametric opposite. And though Caro couldn't know it, he'd studied Stephane as thoroughly as she had, right down to his sandalwood and musk aftershave.

Alan picked up his razor again, stared at it, and this time firmly set it down. Teeth clamped together, he wiped off the shaving foam with a damp washcloth. His face was clean but whisker-stubbed when he was done. He took a sip of coffee, stared at that beard, and then deliberately walked with the mug in his hand to the bedroom and dressed.

The morning was cold and dreary when he left the house; leaves were stuck to his windshield by a promising-winter wind. Carroll would be getting up right around now. Her skin was pink-soft early in the morning; her eyes stayed sleepy until she'd had a second cup of coffee. He knew what she looked like in the morning because they'd had breakfast together a dozen times.

They just hadn't slept together.

He hadn't pushed her to do so because he was terrified. There was only one other woman he'd ever considered marrying, a woman who had gradually drifted from his life, moved on to greener pastures. He hadn't necessarily failed with Jena London, because he'd never wanted, needed, or loved her the way he loved Carroll, but now she came back to haunt him.

She'd accused him of being methodical. He was methodical, and when he was with Carroll, he became even more systematic. He'd tried to be extra careful. He didn't want to risk losing her, and Carroll was clearly wary of jumping into an intimate relationship.

"You haven't shaved," June Goodman said the minute he walked in the door.

"Correct," he told his nurse as he took off his coat. "Afraid you'll have to get used to it. I'm growing a beard."

"How nice." June gave him that all-

men-occasionally-require-patience smile and followed him into his office. "Did you remember to have breakfast this morning?"

"Of course I had breakfast."

Finally left in peace, he perched a hip on the edge of his desk and opened the file for Hannah Michaels, a four-year-old who'd been shifted into first place this morning because she had a dangerously high fever.

He tried to concentrate on Hannah, and could only concentrate on Carroll. He'd been so careful to show her patience, gentleness, affection, respect, to so painstakingly build a relationship before he pressed for sex.

Wasn't that what a woman wanted?

Of course it wasn't what a woman wanted, he thought glumly. Nice men were boring. Nice men weren't . . . heroes. Women wanted romance, excitement, surprises. They didn't want to be saddled for the rest of their lives with a man who was practical and honorable and boring. A woman had a right—and maybe even a need—to be swept off her feet.

Only he didn't know how.

Actually, he didn't have the least idea how.

Learn, said the uncompromising voice in his head.

Two days later when the doorbell rang, Carroll hurried through the hall to answer it, still trying to fasten an amber button earring. The catch had always been difficult. She hadn't yet managed it when she opened the door. "I'm so glad you're early; I was just—*Alan*?"

The earring post popped out and bounced on the carpet behind her. She bent down to find it, muttering embarrassed imprecations, with one eye on the scruffy-looking stranger at the door. Alan didn't wear leather moccasins. Or jeans and cord jackets and black shirts open

three buttons down over a naked chest. Or sport quarter-inch-long whiskers that implied the man had had a week-long hang-over. Or stand like that, looking . . . well. . . . *macho*.

But Alan's grin surfaced when he crouched down beside her, immediately finding the amber earring and leaning toward her to fix it in her ear. "Chaotic morning?" he asked gently.

The masculine scents of sandalwood and musk drifted toward her, faint, startling. "Not really. Mom and Nancy both called this morning, both tearing their hair out over this wedding. Then . . ."

Actually, lots had gone wrong with the morning, from trouble with Nancy's wedding plans to a toaster on the blink. Those kinds of problems didn't bother Carroll, but she'd been desperately anxious to see Alan this morning, to make things normal between them again.

She'd had time to think since her sister's engagement party . . . and she could have kicked herself since. Like secrets stored in an old attic trunk, she'd discovered a few memories that should have been jettisoned years ago.

Five years ago there'd been another engagement party—her own. At the time, everyone she knew was pairing off; Tom had been part of her life for a year, and they'd both done a good job of telling each other they were in love. The first time in bed should have convinced them otherwise—how dreadful could a first time for any two people be?—but it hadn't. And the incident at her engagement party had been nothing, just the accident of seeing Tom talking with another woman, laughing in a way he'd never laughed with her, eyes shining as they'd never shone for her. . . .

She'd had the sense to give him back his ring, and she'd had the empathy to know just how badly she'd hurt him. So much went into her present wariness of

marriage—fear that she hadn't the spark to hold a man for the long term, apprehension that she might thoughtlessly hurt someone else, an awareness that she'd talked herself into believing a relationship existed that never had. Wildly in love, she hadn't been.

Nancy's engagement party had roused all the old fears—foolishly, she saw now. Her relationship with Tom hadn't gone wrong because she hadn't been wildly in love, but because she'd never been honest with herself or him. Only Alan wasn't Tom—how could she have forgotten that? With Alan she had been honest. If she didn't feel some crazy-in-love-type nonsense, she at least had a realistic relationship with him, based on love and sharing and mutual interests—everything that really mattered.

And this morning, she wanted nothing more than to show him that she was her sensible self again, a woman with both feet on the ground. Silly moods and old fantasies had been banished for good. Alan deserved better than a woman yearning after pipedreams. She offered him her best serene smile . . . just in time for Alan to take sudden advantage of his proximity to give her a kiss.

It was just a hello kiss. Alan always gave her a hello kiss, but his lips felt different today, surrounded by the rough, ticklish beard.

"You look beautiful this morning," he told her.

She glanced down, at the old white cords and thick gold sweater she'd donned for the Saturday morning outing. Speechless for a second and a half, she responded carefully, "Alan, are you feeling all right?"

"Just fine." He motioned boyishly to his chin. "Like the beard?"

"Hmmm," she said expressively.

She had little time to mull over the beard, because Alan was thumbing

through her hall closet, getting her coat for her. "I know I promised you we'd look at that colonial house, but there's another place I'd like you to see, too. You've got the whole afternoon free, haven't you?"

"Yes." For a minute, she couldn't imagine why he was standing there holding her kid jacket open. Belatedly, she realized he was doing it for her. Heavens. Swiftly, she slipped into it, a flush on her cheeks that deepened when his hands slipped inside her collar, smoothing it when it didn't need smoothing, touching her in such a way that his fingers caressed the soft skin at the nape of her neck.

Breathless, she slipped ahead of him outside. This just didn't have the feel of an average Saturday morning. She knew it wasn't the average Saturday morning when she looked in the apartment's lot for Alan's New Yorker and saw only a metallic red Fiero. "Alan?"

"Just bought it," he affirmed. "Like her, Caro?"

Climbing into the soft leather seat, glancing at the complicated dials and five on the floor, she wondered where on earth one would put a bag of groceries, much less the stack of medical journals and doctor's bag Alan always carried with him. "Very sporty," she answered. "You sold the New Yorker?"

"Not yet, but I will," Alan said lightly as he put the car in gear and backed up. "It just occurred to me what a practical, sensible car that was. You didn't think I was always practical and sensible, did you, Caro?"

Yes. "No," she said hesitantly. It wasn't like her to lie, but she needed a minute to absorb the meaning of all these changes. As it was, she was still trying to catch her breath.

"One can overdo the responsible image. There's more to life than being serious." Abruptly, he shot her a grin. "We're going to have fun today, and that's a

promise."

"Sounds good," she murmured.

Lafayette's city streets zoomed past, abetted by a purring engine and a cornering speed that had her reaching for her seat belt. The gray-green waters of the Wabash River glittered beneath them, and then they were in West Lafayette, winging past Purdue . . . Carroll stole glances at Alan at every turn.

House hunting on Saturday mornings was just one of the casual pastimes they'd taken up recently. Alan had always chosen outings that suited their mutual needs and interests. Their compatibility was real, and she wasn't likely to forget that again . . . but this morning felt increasingly different from their other dates.

It was the best of October mornings, cool and crisp, with sunlight so bright it turned the leaves to garnet and amber and emerald. City turned into country, with roads that wound around sleepy hills and ancient woods.

Lafayette wasn't the kind of town that boomed or died out on the whim of the economy. Having survived the rule of the British, Indians, and French a few centuries before, the residents had learned to roll with the punches. Suburbs didn't just pop up in Lafayette. New houses were more likely to go up in twos and threes, some in the country and some in the city, all constructed with the understanding that they were going to last.

In time, he pulled onto a sloped gravel path and parked at the crest of a knoll. Beyond birds and squirrels, there wasn't a sign of life. Ahead of them loomed a massive old red barn, with a Pennsylvania Dutch hex sign painted on the roll-open doors. Carroll looked at him bewilderedly.

"Now wait, just wait . . ." Alan climbed out of the car and reached in the back for the box and blanket he'd crammed into the Fiero's tiny storage space. "Follow me.

And don't jump to any conclusions until I've explained. Here."

Alan tossed her the wool blanket. She caught it and trailed after him as he jammed a shoulder into the barn door and pushed. With a haunted creak, it opened.

"Now come on in . . ."

The barn was dark. It smelled like old leather and old wood and cold. Two lofts overlooked the main floor, which was empty except for a pile of loose straw—hay? who knew the difference?—in one corner. On the first level, there was ample space to hold a county fair. The beamed ceiling stretched as high as the sky, and a sparrow—evidently confused—was winging back and forth from one beam to another.

"Alan," Carroll started hesitantly. This was it?

Alan nudged a glass of champagne into Carroll's hand. She would have thanked him if her vocal cords had been functional. As it was, the power of speech had deserted her. So had Alan. He was spreading the wool blanket on the pile of straw. The champagne had appeared from the box he'd just opened, and next to the wine stood a tin of beluga caviar and a box of wafer-thin crackers.

She gulped three sips of the sparkling wine, stared at Alan, and swallowed another gulp. Champagne and caviar for lunch?

He seriously had in mind living in a barn?

Was this Alan, or did he have a twin brother recently escaped from a mental institution?

She took another sip of wine, and would certainly have finished the glass if Alan hadn't taken it from her. In its place, he handed her a cracker mounded high with Russian black roe. "Now," he said with satisfaction, "we can talk."

"I think we'd better," she said faintly.

"But *not* standing up. First we get com-

fortable."

He motioned her down to the blanket. As far as comfort went, the wool blanket was scratchy and the straw unyielding, but none of this was of immediate concern to Carroll. Alan stretched out next to her and propped himself up on an elbow. In contrast to the startled alarm in her own eyes, Alan's reflected the cool blue of a fathomless pond.

"Caro," he said gently, "most people seem to want a two-story colonial house in a suburb. It's a predictable choice, a sensible, logical choice."

"Yes." She couldn't say much more. He'd urged the cracker to her lips, and her taste buds were exploding under the unexpected saltiness of the delicacy.

"We've been looking at houses for weeks, because we like to look at houses, because we both like to imagine what it would be like to live with different floor plans and layouts and in different areas. Yes?"

"Yes," she agreed.

"Yes," Alan echoed, "but last week it occurred to me that we're forgetting to dream, Caro. And that standard traditional houses may be someone else's dream. What about a place that could be made totally individual to us? A place for you to be absolutely anyone you want to be? We can make a nest anywhere . . . on the beach, in a city, in a barn. It takes something more elemental than walls and windows to bring two people together, and we both know that. But what I'd like for you is a place where you feel free to let down your hair, not care about the rules, about responsibilities. Admit it, sweet. Life teaches us all to be cautious, but that isn't really what we want to be. That isn't what you really want to be, now, is it?"

"No . . ." She felt the faintest warmth color her cheeks, as if she'd confessed to the deepest, most intimate secret with that single word. It was so true, though. At

times she'd felt trapped by the lessons life taught her, aware she was overly cautious and maybe too careful. No one wanted to bungle through life asking to be hurt . . . but she'd never wanted to be inhibited with Alan. Did he understand?

Alan's gaze slid from her eyes to her lips. She could feel him staring at her lips as one of his hands slowly reached down and undid the top button of her jacket. Then the second button. Then the third.

"Safe can be nice," he murmured gently. "In fact, I think that's what first attracted you to me, wasn't it, Caro? You've always felt safe with me. But maybe . . . you really never wanted to feel all that safe. And just maybe, it never occurred to you that the two of us are capable of something quite . . . dangerous together."

Again she tried to say something, but words failed her.

Alan smiled with satisfaction, just before his mouth covered hers.

Surrounded by the tattered scruff of beard, his lips were infinitely beguiling, wooing her down, deeper into the blanket. A hum filled her ears with a whispered song about yearning and desire and magic. It was crazy, really.

Alan's tongue stole inside her mouth. Tongue tips touched; hers initially retreated. They were in a barn, she tried to remind herself. She had to muster up a little sense. It was midmorning. It wasn't the right time of day. And Alan would certainly never . . .

It seemed that Alan certainly would, because his fingers unfastened the last button of her jacket. His hand slipped inside; pushed up her heavy wool sweater, and in one smooth motion unlatched the front hook of her bra. For a moment, Carroll was distracted by the faintest whiff of feminine outrage. Where had he acquired the expertise to unlatch front-hooked bras like that? She'd never worn one before; the wisp of violet lace was brand-new . . .

but then, a lot of things suddenly felt brand-new. Dangerously new.

Long, delicious minutes later, he kissed her one last time. The tension in his groin was painful, distracting him when he didn't want to be distracted. He wanted to savor the flush on Caro's cheeks, the trembling of her mouth, the sensual darkness in her eyes when her lashes fluttered open. He'd never seen Caro like this. He'd never dreamed how special, how beautiful, how vulnerable she was in loving.

There was a word for a woman who teased. There was probably a word for a man as well. Unfortunately, he'd have to live with the epithet, because he'd just had an infinitely clear glimpse of how it could be for them, how he wanted it to be for Carroll when they made love for the first time.

The caviar and wine had been so easy. He could think up more ways to court her as a woman wanted to be courted. He'd been selfish, he realized, too set in his ways to see Carroll's needs—but that was all going to change. He was going to change—completely.

"Caro?" Reluctantly, he leaned away from her to reach for the bottle of champagne and tin of caviar. When he handed her a cracker and a glass of wine, their eyes met, and he couldn't help but smile. Carroll was lying limply on the blanket, and her brown eyes still looked dazed. "Would you like to go dancing tonight?" he asked her.

"Dancing?" The word seemed unfamiliar. The world seemed vaguely unfamiliar.

Alan clicked glasses with her, winked with a winsome grin. "Dancing," he repeated. "As in—until dawn, Caro. Tonight, if you're free?"

"Yes, but, Alan? I always thought . . . you didn't like to dance."

He motioned that detail aside with a

wave of his hand and took a long swallow of wine, his gaze flickering absently around the barn. "Do you see what I mean about this place now, honey?"

Carroll restudied her surroundings, this time barely noticing the cobwebs and chill and bare boards. Maybe they were still there, but they didn't seem to matter as much. All her life, she'd been determined to be practical. At this moment, she could envision a palace in a treehouse. "An endless feeling of spaciousness," she commented blissfully.

"It would definitely be a house like no one else's."

"Absolutely. And character, Alan. The whole place has character." Alan threw back his head and laughed, and Carroll cocked her head at him curiously. "What's so funny?"

"Oh . . . nothing's funny, exactly. I'm just so relieved you like the place, can see the same potential in it that I do, Caro. When you first walked in, I could see you had doubts."

"A few, maybe—but none that seem so terribly important now," she said softly, although she wasn't sure she was referring to the barn.

"Good," Alan said with satisfaction, "because I bought the property yesterday."

A dollop of caviar suddenly went down Carroll's throat the wrong way. Alan thumped her on the back until the coughing spasm passed.

At seven-thirty the next evening, Carroll stepped ahead of Alan into his apartment for their customary Sunday dinner date. "You didn't say who was cooking tonight . . . as if I didn't know," she said teasingly.

"So you *think* you know. As it happens, the kitchen is completely off limits to you tonight." Alan hung up both their coats, casting a critical eye on his living room.

Everything was set up as planned, but he couldn't shake the feeling that it just wasn't enough. The picnic lunch, necking in the barn—they'd all worked. Carroll was blossoming in front of his eyes. Unfortunately, the small successes had made him see that huge ones might be possible if he could just manage this business of courting her properly. If he was man enough. If he could completely change, *be* a different kind of man for her . . .

He caught her soft spaniel-brown eyes on him, banished his lingering worries, and grinned. "I see that look in your eyes, but you're dead wrong, kitten," he said lazily. "I not only cooked dinner, but it's ready and waiting for us."

Dropping her purse on an end table, she raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I see. You've hired a catering service," she said blandly.

"No."

"Your mother came over earlier to put something in the oven while you were picking me up?"

"No."

"Good Lord. You've kidnapped some poor woman, and you have her tied to the stove?"

"No." He planted a kiss on the tip of her nose. "I've discovered that any man can learn to cook."

"I'm terribly sorry for doubting you," Carroll said gravely, and resigned herself to a burned dinner.

It hardly mattered, when dinner was the last thing on her mind. Alan was wearing black, a pirate-style shirt she'd never seen before. She was becoming used to the new and unexpected additions to his wardrobe; reading the new sensual look in his eyes was something else. One minute they were laughing and talking the way they always had; the next she felt lavishly, mysteriously studied by those rich blue eyes of his. It was enough to make a sensible woman's toes tingle.

"Now just relax, kick off your shoes,

and prepare for a feast," Alan called over his shoulder. "You're not allowed in the kitchen—I'll bring you a glass of tequila."

"Tequila?" They both liked a can of beer during a football game and an occasional glass of wine with dinner. Tequila, never. "Alan, you haven't been experimenting with any fancy Mexican sauces, have you?" she asked with alarm.

Alan was bringing her a frosted glass of tequila with a layer of salt on the rim. "Will you sit down and trust me?" he scolded before disappearing into the kitchen again. "It's *not* refried beans," he called back by way of reassurance.

Hmmm. Still standing, Carroll took a sip from the glass, shuddered, and stared at the misleadingly innocuous clear liquid. It was pure and simple firewater . . . and it left a faint dusting of salt on her upper lip.

Maybe it was the sting of the tequila, but her eyes abruptly started playing tricks on her. Alan's apartment was normally as familiar as her own. But now her eyes were drawn with startling speed to the huge new oil painting that hung over his couch. As she studied the picture, the impressionistic blur of siennas and golds and flesh tones gradually settled into the shapes of a naked man and woman. And the longer she stared at it, the more obvious it became that the man and woman weren't playing tiddlywinks.

Heavens. Her gaze swiftly took in the rest of the room. All clutter had disappeared. His medical books and journals had been neatly put away. The only printed material left casually out was an expensive book of prints bound in hand-tooled leather. Oriental prints. Erotic Oriental prints. Alan never looked at that kind of thing.

Or maybe he did.

Absently, she rubbed a finger on her temple. Over the last days, she realized that she'd been unfair ever to peg Alan

into a predictable slot. And there was no question that she relished the discovery of dimensions in him—and in herself—she hadn't known about before, but occasionally she felt . . . well . . . lost. She never knew what he was going to do next, and just a little of that old predictability would have been nice to hold on to. Not that he wasn't entitled to buy an oil or look at sultry nudes if he wanted to.

He smiled as he carried in a large tray from the kitchen. "You haven't been making yourself comfortable," he chided. "This is a shoes-off kind of dinner. I told you."

"Yes." She studied the tray as she obediently slipped off her shoes, well aware Alan was lighting the three candles and switching out the other lights. The tequila suddenly settled in her stomach with a tattoo of Hello there, Nerves.

So this was finally the night? She wanted it to be; that was why she was wearing brand-new French panties and a violet bra under her sweater and slacks, why she'd bathed in perfumed water. And if she'd had any doubts that Alan was in the mood, he'd dispelled them with the kiss when he'd picked her up. That kiss was from a man who was tired of waiting.

She'd responded like a woman who was tired of making him wait, but the tray in his hands was almost as diverting as the nude oil on the wall. "Alan, what is this?" Following his lead, she settled on the carpet with one of the huge pillows behind her.

"Tapas. They call them 'the small foods of Spain.' You're going to love these, Caro." He pointed to each small plate on the tray, identifying the delicacies. "Quail with a thyme sauce. Rolled anchovy fillets on picks. Poached squid in a hot tomato sauce. Wild mushrooms, raw oysters, and cactus paddles."

"Sounds wonderful." She gave him a brilliant smile, her heart sinking. He'd

gone to so much trouble. Every dish had been artfully arranged, all for her, but she didn't have the fortitude to swallow an anchovy. As for the rest . . .

"Thought it would be more fun to picnic on the carpet. Wait until you taste, kitten."

She was more than willing to wait, but he nudged a tidbit toward her lips. She clamped down, chewed delicately, and reached quickly for the tequila, trying not to make the move appear violent or desperate. "That must be the squid?"

He nodded. "I figured I'd experiment with one kind of foreign food a week. For next week, I found an entire cookbook full of recipes from Tibet; they call for spices I'd never even heard of. Anyway, Spanish tonight. Like it?"

"Mmmm."

He leaned toward her. Her breath stopped altogether. "You've got to try the cactus paddles," he urged.

"The . . . oh. I will, I will." Her eyes dropped to the small plate he'd just filled for her, and she gave up once and for all on her hopes for the night. Romance and an upset stomach simply did not go together.

"Don't go," warbled the frail voice. The five-year-old, Susie Smith, was little more than two dark burning eyes surrounded by white—white sheets, white blankets, and white walls in the background.

"Sweetheart, I promised you I'd stay until you fell asleep, and I will." Alan glanced at the clock on the hospital room wall. It was late on the night after his cooking premiere. Around nine, weariness had settled over him like a pall, but he still hadn't been able to leave the hospital.

Right after visiting hours were over and her mother had left, Susie had changed her mind about having her adenoids out in the morning. She'd decided definitely not to.

"One more story," she coaxed now.

Three stories later, Alan was finally free to tug on his coat and escape the hospital. A still night and a sky full of stars greeted him outside. His car was the only one left in its row. As he started the engine, he told himself for the hundredth time that these late-night hospital visits were unnecessary. During the day, he always checked on the few pediatrics patients he had scheduled for minor surgery.

His problem, as he'd mentally told himself a dozen times, was that he didn't have pediatrics patients; he had Susie and Johnny and Billy and Kim. For a short time, they weren't their parents' kids but his. An attitude that his mentors had tried very hard to purge him of in medical school—with absolutely no success.

At home, he shucked his clothes and stood for long minutes under a hot shower, which against all odds woke him up.

Lying in the darkness, fully awake, he stared at the ceiling and thought of Carroll. Sleeping alone was not fun. Sleeping alone was even less fun when a man knew there was a woman on the other side of the city who was more than willing to share her bed with him. Not at this hour, of course. He glanced at the luminous face of his clock radio. Two A.M. No, hardly at this hour, but the principle was the same.

He'd spent all last night after Caro left trying to think of some way to ensure that making love with him would be the most unforgettable experience of her life. It appeared he was going to spend another night the same way.

The thing is, he lacked daring. Imagination. A true spirit of romantic devilment. Women wanted things like that. A true romantic hero would not think about the time or worry about interrupting her sleep. A true romantic hero took chances.

Abruptly, Alan sat up in bed and switched on the light. The mirror over his dresser reflected back a squinting man

with disheveled hair, gray pajama tops, and a determined scowl. You're crazy, said a little voice in his head. Go back to bed.

Clean black socks were neatly folded in his drawer. He put those on after he'd pulled on a dark sweater and jeans. Yawning, he grabbed a jacket and stuffed his keys in his back pocket. *She'll have the little men come to put you away. They'll be smiling patiently and carrying a strait-jacket . . .*

He refused to feel another qualm, until he reached Carroll's building, parked the car, and took a long look at the dark windows of her apartment. She was unquestionably asleep.

Sleepy, however, could be an advantage. She wouldn't be quite so likely to think he'd lost his mind. *Stop that kind of negative thinking*, he commanded himself. Climbing out of the car, he took firm steps around the side of her building.

He knew which windows went to her bedroom. The trick was getting to them. He pivoted around to make sure no patrol cars were anywhere in sight, then let his eyes focus on the oak tree in her courtyard. No one could have asked for a sturdier tree, and there was a thick branch right next to her window.

There was no ladder nearby, but there was an empty trash can. He stared at it for a moment, then carefully, quietly took off the lid, turned it upside down, and carried it back to the oak. Once he was standing on it, it was only one long heave into the belly of the tree.

Branches snagged his jacket, and for a moment he lay winded, irritated beyond measure that he could be this badly out of shape. Still breathing heavily, he looked up. The yard light glowed brightly enough for him to see her window through the thick-fingered branches. They would hold his weight.

He shimmied forward along the

strongest branch. A limb caught at his jeans; another tried to tangle in his hair. In time, though, in methodical good time, he gained enough yardage so that he could reach out and touch her window. After that, he took several seconds to catch his breath and wipe the dampness from his brow.

He finally worked up the courage to rap once, then twice on the pane, very softly. So softly that he couldn't believe it when the window was promptly thrown open.

By eleven that night, Carroll was buried beneath three comforters in bed with a heating pad on her stomach. She was freezing with what had to be the flu. Nightmares were dancing on her walls.

It had been years since she'd missed a day of work. The only reason she hadn't gone in that morning was that she hadn't been able to sit up without cringing.

Now she didn't really feel that bad. Actually, she felt increasingly wonderful, lightheaded and free and dreamy. Moonlight filtered in the window, making increasingly strange shapes on her bedroom wall.

Moonlight and dreams gradually blended together. She was making love with Alan under the cool trickle of a waterfall. Both of them were naked, their flesh slick and cool . . . instants later, the waterfall and Alan were gone and something dark and terrifying was chasing her in the night, chasing her with a torch, so hot, so hot . . . and then the weirdest dream of all, of a tall, dark stranger rapping on her window. Silly, her bedroom window was on the second floor, but the rapping continued, and in the dream it seemed perfectly natural to float out of bed, fly to the window, and throw it open to the crisp, cold night and her ravisher.

"Hi there," Carroll said seductively. "I've been waiting for you."

Wonderful air as cold as ice rushed over

her overheated skin from the opened window. She shivered from her toes to her soul in response. She'd had ravishment dreams before, but never as good as this one. The tall, dark stranger was turning into Alan, the best part of all.

"Waiting for me?" Dark eyes peered in, dazzing her with their intensity.

"All my life," she said blithely. "Hurry. I love you." Anticipation danced in her bloodstream. Exhilaration, laughter, and champagne danced along with it. In the dream, she'd had liters and liters of champagne and no inhibitions at all. Heat was pouring from her nerve endings, pure female, lusty heat. She slipped her fingers through her hair, shaking the tousled mop in seductive invitation.

There was another slight hesitation, then one jeaned leg slid through the opening, then a long, bent-over body. "I love"—then the last leg—"you, too." The window slammed behind him. Breathing heavily for a moment, Alan rubbed his hands on the backs of his jeans to rid them of bark and leaf debris, then stood there in silence. His voice finally pierced the darkness, low and hoarse. "Caro, I *do* love you. I've loved you for so long. I know this must look crazy . . ."

"No!" Her ravisher was shy, delighting her. "It's not at all crazy." She rushed forward on the thinnest carpet of air, slipping her arms around his waist. His jacket was freezing against her long flannel nightgown, for an instant shocking her, disturbing the sensations she was enjoying in the dream. Her fever-clogged brain refused the intrusion of reality. "Nothing's crazy between the two of us. Take me, Alan!"

She rose up on tiptoe, sealing his cold lips with her own. With brazen freedom, she rocked her pelvis against him, let her wanton fingers rush through his hair and tighten. It took no time at all to warm his lips, no time at all for her kidnapper to pick up the spirit of devil-may-care seduc-

tion.

"Caro?" A flat hand suddenly pressed itself against her forehead.

He tore himself away from her so fast she was left bereft, her arms still reaching for him. Her bedside lamp was switched on, and her dream took an abrupt, nightmarish turn. No decent dream would leave her stranded, wearing a long, bulky nightgown with white athletic socks. She immediately lunged for the light and switched it off. The darkness was better, but not quite as good as before. Something was going wrong very fast.

Actually, everything was going very wrong very fast. She was no longer blazingly hot but chilled. A fit of trembling took her body by storm, and she felt damp and dizzy, but no longer nice-dizzy. A knife seemed to be lodged in her brain, slicing away, and her ravisher was no longer murmuring sweet nothings but a steady refrain of "dammit, dammit, dammit" as he moved around the room.

He changed the litany momentarily to "Caro, just *stay* there," when he pushed her into a chair.

She heard the sound of his jacket flung against the wall, the incredibly loud switch-on of the overhead light. She winced at the cruel blaze of light. Confusion made everything surrealistic, like part of a dream. It *had* to be a dream.

One instant he was on the far-side of the room, and the next instant he was kneeling in front of her, his dark blue eyes relentless, piercing, as fathomless as those of the pirate lover in some historical novel. He was furious, the rational part of her brain told her, but that dreaming part of Carroll heard his voice, gentle, tender, as soothing as velvet. "I'm going to take your nightgown off, love. You'll be far more comfortable in a dry one."

Maybe true, but the nightgown he'd pulled from her drawer was old, faded, and insufferably prim. "I'd prefer," she

whispered, "the pink one with lace."

"Pardon?"

"The pink one. Alan, I'm *not* making love to you in *that* nightgown."

"Ah. Sweetheart, when we make love you won't be wearing anything, so it hardly makes any difference. And in the meantime, raise your arms."

She did.

"Now where's your thermometer?"

She couldn't think *that* clearly.

"All right. I'll find it. Now, have you taken aspirin?"

He urged her into bed, a feat that didn't take much coaxing. He seemed to have stolen all her blankets except the comforter, which wasn't enough to keep her warm. She tried to tell him, but he popped a thermometer into her mouth.

He grabbed her hand, but it wasn't a loverlike hold. His two fingers were pressed to her wrist, and with the other hand he was smoothing back her hair.

"A hundred and three degrees. A hundred and three degrees, and you didn't call me!"

"I feel fine," she assured him.

"You feel like hell."

"I do not! Darn it, Alan, every kid in school has the same stupid flu. A high fever and aches and pains and that's it. I am *fine*, and my glands are *wonderful*, thank you." She pushed his hands away from the swollen nodules in her throat.

"My four-year-olds make better patients than you do," Alan informed her, and stood up, readjusting the covers around her chin. "I'm going to get you something to drink and some aspirin . . ."

She couldn't imagine why she was happy he was there. He was treating her like one of his four-year-old patients; she did *not* want the glass of orange juice he brought back and bullied her into drinking, and embarrassing fragments of an extremely silly dream were gradually filtering back to her. She tried to apologize, but

all Alan would talk about was how relieved he was that her fever was breaking. She'd been a lot happier when the fever was raging. Now she felt truly awful.

Still, when he turned out the light, she panicked. "You're not going home?"

"No." In the darkness, he shucked off his clothes and slid into bed beside her. Gently, he turned her on her side, facing away from him, and tucked her spoon fashion against his chest and bent knees before pulling the light cover up to her chin. With a sigh, he settled down. His arms slid firmly around her waist. "I guarantee," he murmured, "to keep you warm, Caro."

Fuzzy, woolly darkness enclosed her.

Just before she fell asleep, she murmured, "Alan, I dreamed you climbed in the window."

"Caro," Alan said gently, "you were delirious."

"But I know I locked the door. I always lock the—"

"Sssh. Sleep now. You need rest."

Carroll stretched, yawned, and sleepily opened her eyes . . . then blinked. A shaggy bear seemed to be lying next to her. A huge, warm shaggy bear with disheveled brown hair and a brown beard and alert blue eyes. "G'morning," she said groggily.

"Feel better?"

She nodded and snuggled closer.

"You're not wearing a stitch of clothes," she mentioned.

"No."

"*Nothing.*"

Alan reached under the covers, captured her wandering hand, and pinned it against his chest. He never blinked an eye.

She smiled sleepily, and her eyelids drifted closed again. Vague memories of the night before began wandering through her consciousness, most of them running

a fine line between mortification and embarrassment. Since she couldn't pretend they hadn't happened, owning up seemed like the only sensible choice. "I'm sorry, Alan," she said quietly.

"Hey. Don't be silly." His thumb stroked her cheek. "Are you ever going to get ill like that again without calling me?"

"No, sir."

"The fever's gone, kitten."

"And I feel wonderful." To prove it, she slid her arms around his bare waist and sneaked a flannel-covered leg between his. She'd wasted hours, having him naked in bed with her and not even knowing it. And after all those months of postponing intimacy, she could no longer remember a single reason why. It felt perfectly natural waking up with Alan.

"When," he murmured, "did the lady get so brazen?"

"I think she was brazen all along. Maybe she has always had a latent sensual streak, just waiting for a chance to break out."

"I like it."

"I'm glad."

"If you weren't still sick," he said firmly.

"I'm not ill anymore," she assured him.

"So you think. But you haven't tried to get out of bed yet."

"The last thing I want to do is get out of bed."

"Caro . . ." Alan suddenly wasn't smiling. "Once you're well, once I seriously get you in bed," he said quietly, "I may never let you out of it."

A lump formed in her throat. She reached up to touch his bearded cheek. "I love you, Alan."

"And I love you. More than I can ever seem to find the words to tell you."

She shook her head. "I never needed words. But I needed"—she hesitated—"to be sure."

"Of me?"

"Maybe of myself, of us." She made her tone deceptively light. "I always wanted to be one of those assertive women who blithely jump into bed whenever they feel like it, who don't hesitate to express their own sexual needs and feelings. There's only a thin line between those women and me. I'd like to tell you that line has something to do with high standards, but in truth it has more to do with cowardice."

"Cowardice?" Alan echoed.

She snuggled closer. "First times. First times aren't fun. First times are made up of worrying that things won't go well and worrying about what your partner thinks of your body, and worrying about doing the right things, saying the right things . . ."

For a moment, Alan was quiet; then he probed gently. "He hurt you, didn't he, Caro?"

"Who?"

"A man. Sometime. Your first?"

She closed her eyes, feeling oddly shy. "It was years ago, and shouldn't matter anymore, but ever since then . . . Love's supposed to take away the inhibitions, but for me it makes them worse. It isn't sex that scares me, Alan; it's just that I worry about the first time. I just . . . didn't want you to walk away."

"Caro, look at me." He nudged her chin up with his hand. "First times for a man are made of worrying he won't perform to the lady's needs and satisfaction. Worrying she'll discover his paunch. Worrying he won't find those particular things that turn her on, those things that happen so naturally between lovers who know each other."

She waited a moment, absorbed what he had told her, realized that it was the same for him as it was for her. "You don't" she ventured finally, "have a paunch. And I wouldn't care if you had."

"And you have a beautiful body, wom-

an.”

“You haven’t seen it yet,” she reminded him.

“I saw it last night.”

“You weren’t even looking then. You were busy bullying me into wearing this horrible nightgown—”

“You have to be joking,” he said dryly. “You have a tiny mole just under your right breast.” His lips brushed her cheek. “A faint scar on your lower abdomen, less than an inch, the size of a sliver.”

“Alan.” Color was rising in her cheeks faster than a river in a flood.

“It’s going to be fine between us, Caro.” He leaned back again and possessively tucked the covers around her. “If I’d known that was all you were worried about, we would have been in bed long before this. But now you need some sleep.”

She moaned, but he left her anyway.

Caro survived Tuesday, joined the living on Wednesday, and felt unquestionably human by Thursday . . . having little choice in the matter. Her momentum to get well arose from a man solicitously feeding her gourmet Vietnamese, Hungarian, and Peruvian specialties. Not only was her kitchen never going to recover, but Carroll came back to life out of sheer hunger.

Just home from school on Friday, still wearing her coat, she grabbed a carrot stick from the refrigerator and munched on it as she dialed the number of Alan’s office. She’d already tried to reach him twice from work. Both times he’d been with patients. This time he told her that the way it looked, he wouldn’t be out of the hospital until ten o’clock.

Caro sighed as she hung up the phone.

The man deserved to be paid back for the care he’d given her for the past three nights. Her refrigerator was still stocked with more citrus juices than she could

drink in a lifetime. He’d brought her daf-fodils. He bullied her into staying in bed as if she were some kind of invalid; then he’d beaten her at Scrabble. And if he hadn’t stayed with her those nights, at least he’d stayed until she fell asleep . . . and if she didn’t fall asleep at an hour early enough to suit him, he’d read her medical journals, the content of which was enough to cure the most hardened insomniac.

There wasn’t the slimmest chance she would let him know if she ever caught a sniffle again. Safer yet, she’d just stay permanently healthy. In the meantime, she had in mind repaying him by feeding him even if it was only the Chinese take-out she was craving.

Balancing two bags filled with white cartons, Carroll rapped on the door of Alan’s ground-floor apartment at ten-thirty and waited. When there was no answer, she turned around and again identified Alan’s red Fiero in the lot. He was definitely home.

After knocking one more time, she tried the doorknob and pushed. The door wasn’t locked. Inside, she found only dusky darkness and total silence. “Alan?” she called softly, and stepped in.

Adjusting the packages in her arms, she switched on a lamp to dispel the late evening gloom, then continued to the kitchen. From the doorway, she saw him, his elbows on the kitchen table and his face in his hands.

Her heart ached as if she were the despairing one. Loving him made his hurt hers. She didn’t need to know the nature of the problem. Actually, she didn’t need to know anything at all. “Hey, you,” she said softly.

His head jerked up instantly. His shoulders squared, exhaustion was banished from his features, and an almost-smile touched his mouth as he stood up. She

could have kicked him. More than that, she could have kicked herself, for so belatedly realizing how often and successfully he hid his real feelings.

"I didn't hear you come in," Alan said.

"Of course you didn't hear me. I was tiptoeing—and don't worry that I'm going to stay. I know you're tired and so am I," she lied. "Which was when it occurred to me that you might not feel like fixing a meal. So . . ." She motioned to the bags full of Chinese food. "I'll get the plates and silverware. Beer?"

He shook his head. "I'm out. I think there's some milk."

"That'll do. Want to eat in front of the TV?"

He hesitated. He honestly wanted no one anywhere around him, least of all Carroll. He wasn't in a romantic mood. He felt as exciting as yesterday's newspaper.

In that short time he'd hesitated, though, Carroll had whisked past him. She turned on the lamps in the living room and tuned into the news on TV. Then she pushed aside the coffee table and dragged the huge pillows in front of the couch to serve as footrests.

Five minutes later, she was stealing war sui gui from his plate.

"I'm leaving right after the news," she promised him.

When the news was over, she mentioned that she was leaving right after the rerun of M*A*S*H. But when that was over, she was busy rinsing the dishes in his kitchen. She returned to the living room carrying his mail and the paper. Handing him the front page and sports section along with the mail, she took the women's section and crossword and flopped down in his recliner.

"I'm leaving right after this," she told him.

At eleven she made popcorn—unhealthfully, lavishly slathered with butter, exactly the way he liked it—and propped

herself against a pillow at his feet, frequently lifting the popcorn bowl so he could reach it. Rocky was on the tube, a rerun. Sylvester hadn't changed from the first airing. He remained unwashed, misunderstood, and macho.

"Caro . . ." Alan said finally.

She shushed him, bringing the first smile to his face in hours. Not that she didn't have a right to enjoy the movie, but she was staring in fascination at the commercial for a deodorant. Such a maneuvering woman. And as if he'd invited her there, she suddenly stood up, stretched, and made it look perfectly logical for her then to resettle next to him on the couch.

In time, she simply reached for his remote control switch and turned off the sound. He barely noticed, wasn't even aware she'd turned off the sound.

"I delivered a little boy around five years ago," he said quietly, just as if they'd been having a conversation. "I can still remember the day this scrawny little man bolted into my office as if demons were after him, claiming his wife was in labor and there wasn't time to get her to the hospital. They lived right across the street, and the hospital isn't that far from here—I tried to tell him, to calm him down, but he wasn't listening. He couldn't listen; he was coming apart at the seams. And he was right, she'd been in labor for hours but had thought it was another false alarm—the contractions were irregular, Caro; there wasn't time."

"A healthy baby?"

"Very. I'll never forget what a hurry that boy was in to rush into life . . . Jonathan Roberts was his name. He was my patient from that day. I watched him grow. He was such a pistol, never gave his parents a moment's rest. Nothing halfway about him; with Jonathan it was always all or nothing. He was bright, but such a devil. He would have started kindergarten this year. Except that in July, his mother

brought him to me for a checkup."

She said nothing, afraid to move, afraid to breathe. Alan wasn't looking at her.

"I sent him to a neurologist, a friend of mine. I wish I hadn't been absolutely sure what was wrong, but I was absolutely sure. At one time, I considered specializing in pediatric neurology, even did my internship in that field. Barker's the best man there is, but I knew when the boy went in that his chances were never better than fifty-fifty."

"Alan . . ." she whispered.

"A good doctor," Alan spat out, flat and hard, "remains objective about these things. A doctor who loses his objectivity has no business practicing medicine. That's a simple fact. In time, we'll know more. And in the meantime, we help those we can. That's the way it has to be. No exceptions." He added absently, "I was waiting for Barker when he got out of surgery with the boy this afternoon."

She didn't ask what had happened. She knew. Tears welled up in her eyes as she reached for Alan. As if her slightest touch triggered a fuse, the muscles in his face tightened, the color drained from his face, and his eyes were a blaze of anger and frustration and bitterness and grief.

"Dammit," he said fiercely. "Damn everything. There was nothing I could do."

Though her touch had been gentle, Alan instantly withdrew from her. Physically, he moved only inches away, jerking himself up to a sitting position with his face averted. Emotionally, though, Carroll could feel the distance he was determined to create between them. The glare of lamplight showed his rigid profile and the lines of strain and frustration on his face. His eyes were remote, as blue as ice, a thousand miles away from her.

"Look," he rasped. "Forget I told you any of it, would you? Just—"

She heard the leave-me-alone tone in his voice. So he didn't want comfort? He

was so very sure he didn't want comfort. Pressing her hand to the back of his head, she touched his lips with hers, and so fast, like the touch of flame to tinder, found fire.

Oh, Alan, she thought fleetingly. You didn't really think I'd let you be alone right now?

His mouth groped blindly on hers, and she found herself crushed, enclosed very suddenly in steel manacles. His right hand clenched in her hair, and his other arm wrapped itself tightly around her—too tightly—as if she were a treasure trying to escape him, as if she would spring free if he gave her a moment to breathe.

She wasn't going anywhere.

Her mouth was acquiescent beneath his, accepting the fierce pressure of his lips and inviting more. It wasn't a kiss of passion but the kiss of a man lost and trying to find something to hold on to. She tasted frustration and grief. She tasted a man who could accept neither very well, a man who would never accept loss easily. All she could do was be there. Willingly, her mouth cushioned his. Willingly, she absorbed the bruising seal he made of their lips until she could barely breathe. He didn't seem to notice, and she certainly didn't care.

His hands were suddenly everywhere, desperately seeking skin. Needing warmth. She felt her sweat shirt being pushed up, then the tug of her bra until the catch sprang open.

Her spine sank into the cushions as they both fell back and finished undressing. Caro could suddenly not keep her hands off him. Sex had nothing to do with it. She would just as willingly have climbed mountains or turned cartwheels if she'd thought it would erase the grief and frustration and anger in his eyes. Loving Alan was the only thing that mattered.

Silky flames lapped at her nerve endings until her skin felt like toast, hot on the

outside, buttery-soft within. His palm stroked up and down her spine, a no-hurry whisper caress that made her shiver. His lips sought the pulse points in her wrist, her temples, her throat, courting her slow, lazy, sleepy heartbeat. When he finally joined them, she realized that she'd been empty forever. The gentleman above her might have been delicate enough to close his eyes . . . but he didn't.

And she watched him as he watched her. Their limbs interwove, her legs wrapped around his, and her hands relished the slick, smooth warmth of his skin as he started the rhythm. She knew the song. Although she'd never heard it before, she knew the song. It soared in her veins, on her skin, through the night. She ached from the wanting, from the need that brazenly claimed her flesh, her heart. A civil war could have taken place outside the window, and still she watched his eyes.

His eyes were love-blue, a color she'd never come across before.

She loved his eyes.

Ecstasy rippled through her with the brilliance and light of a firecracker, never expected, not like this. She felt his flow of life, heard his harsh, helpless cry, tasted love in the kiss he gave her. Such a gift. Such a celebration.



In the morning, she woke up to the shock of sunlight. Alan was still sleeping, and she might have dozed off again if her eyes hadn't focused on her surroundings. Groggy lethargy abruptly disappeared.

This wasn't the room she remembered. They were sleeping on black satin sheets. His new spread was a zebra-striped fur. Wild African molas hung on the walls, all primitive slashes of color.

Good Lord.

Slowly, she snuggled back next to him. Alan, she thought humorously, I can take the Fiero, and I can take the beard if I have

to, but honestly . . .

Unease wandered through her mind, the same unease that had been nagging her for weeks. A blind fool couldn't have missed the striking changes he'd made in his lifestyle. Carroll wasn't blind, but neither was she delighted by some of the new touches. Waking up to zebra stripes every morning, a steady diet of caviar and squid in hot tomato sauce—no, but darn it, she didn't want to hurt his feelings. A once-predictable man was becoming totally unpredictable. And security was nurtured by understanding . . . and there were times lately when she didn't understand him at all.

The man next to her suddenly showed remarkable energy for someone who was supposed to be sound asleep. He nuzzled her as he tugged her underneath him; he nuzzled her arms as he wrapped them around his neck; he nuzzled her lips until they parted, and he rubbed against her until her legs opened, too.

Oh, hell, she thought helplessly. If he really wanted to, he could decorate the whole place in zebra stripes.

It was the last thought she had for some time. Alan settled right down to the business of pleasure. Hers. If she'd had any last lingering doubts that he found her body beautiful, they rapidly disappeared. He liked everything. Breasts, ribs, wrists. Nose. Ears. Navel.

Nothing was off limits to the man, and he was incredibly slow. She did any number of clever things to speed him up, but he was clearly intent on driving her mad with wanting. She'd never been the kind of woman who could be driven mad with wanting.

Alan proved her wrong, and when it was over, she lay wrapped in his arms, too exhausted to lift a finger, too sated to move. "Don't," she murmured.

"Don't what?"

"You're looking at me," she accused

him from behind closed eyes.

"I love looking at you. I'm never going to stop looking at you. Caro?"

"Hmmm?"

"You're a delicious lover. And a delectable woman. And I never even imagined loving anyone as much as I love you. And if I never told you before, I—hey."

Her eyes shot open. She could feel the warm flush on her skin from his whispered words, but it wasn't that warm flush Alan was staring at. Glaring at, actually. His forefinger gently, softly touched the chafed skin around her breasts.

"Did I do that to you?" he demanded gruffly.

"Alan, it's nothing."

"My beard did that to you, and you never said one word?"

"It's nothing, honestly. The redness will go away. It doesn't hurt. It's nothing," she assured him, but he was already leaping out of bed, heading for the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, she had her clean-shaven man back again. When he pounced on the bed, he had a devilish gleam in his eye, and a lot of interest in rubbing his smooth cheeks in lots of sensitive places.

She could have sworn she didn't have an ounce of energy left in her body, but she miraculously found some. Her heart soared from kiss to kiss.

Those little nagging voices in her head ceased once and for all. Zebra stripes notwithstanding, no woman could be so foolish as to think anything was wrong with a man who loved like that.

"Wonderful wedding! Absolutely wonderful!" Mrs. Tobins leaned close to buss Carroll's cheek, and whispered, "I don't doubt for a minute you'll be next, darling! Don't you worry about a thing. You'll land that young man of yours!"

Carroll smiled, a little wanly. Who could have guessed that the receiving line

would be a gauntlet? Her feet were killing her, she was so tired she could have fallen asleep standing on her head; and if one more person made one more reference to her single state . . .

Mary Sue Stuart loomed next in the receiving line, herding her second husband and three children ahead of her. "Sweetie, when on earth are you going to pin down that adorable doctor?" she whispered, with the exact same giggle that had driven Carroll nuts since they were in grade school.

She hardly had the option to scream, and once the receiving line ended, she could get off her feet for only a few short minutes. Maybe she was becoming inordinately touchy on the subject of Alan and marriage. A little break was all she needed . . . but breaks were in short supply for the next hour and a half.

Once the wedding guests had been greeted, the reception dinner began. Carroll, stuck at the head table as maid of honor, kept trying to sneak glimpses of Alan . . . but Alan seemed inordinately busy with the tipsy blonde in gold brocade at the third table.

Following dinner, the band started to play. Stephane led Nancy in the traditional first dance, after which the bridegroom came toward Carroll to claim the second. No, she thought fleetingly, my feet really aren't capable of moving . . . but there was no help for it. With a brilliant smile, she let Stephane lead her to the dance floor.

"How's my newest sister tonight . . . besides breathtakingly beautiful?"

"Nowhere near as resplendent as my new brother," she responded lightly.

She felt almost like a beauty . . . but a beauty very close to total collapse. It might be only nine in the evening, but the day had been hectic—not to mention the week leading up to it. Her feet were still killing her, her head was pounding, and her vision was blurred from lack of sleep.

She didn't want to see another dance floor, another magnum of champagne, or another flower for the next hundred years, give or take a few.

On Monday, Alan had picked her up after work, and they'd driven to a nightclub in Chicago. She'd drunk far too much champagne, danced her feet off altogether, and arrived home in time to snatch three hours of rest before going to work the next day. On Tuesday, he'd arrived with his arms full of flowers and tickets to a mime production at the university. On Wednesday, he'd brought her gardenias and led her into the woods, where he'd cooked dinner over an open fire, then taken her home to Cold Duck and candlelight. On Thursday, he'd found an all-weather skating rink that played romantic music until the wee hours.

Last night had been the rehearsal dinner, which had ended early enough, if either of them had had the sense to just go home and go to bed. They'd gone home. And gone to bed. They just hadn't slept.

Sometime soon, she had to sleep. All the razzle-dazzle was delightful; she felt courted like a princess. Only at the ragged old age of twenty-seven, she was starting to get dark circles under her eyes, and the wedding—to her own surprise—was making her a little nervous. Courting usually led to a ring. Alan hadn't mentioned rings in weeks.

Finally, the dance ended . . . and before the band could begin another song, the guests began clinking spoons against their glasses, demanding in the traditional way that the groom kiss the bride. Stephane winked a good-bye at her, and went off in search of Nancy. The crystal-metal clanging had reached fever pitch by the time the two obediently pleased the crowd by going into a passionate clinch.

Watching them, the silliest blur filled Carroll's eyes. How sentimental could you get? And it had started for her at the

church, when she'd seen the reflection of candlelight on stained glass, heard the first strains of the wedding march, and sensed the promise of love in the air.

Turning, she saw Alan coming toward her across the crowded room and immediately moved toward him.

He reached her and held out his hands. She clasped them, smiling. "Can I steal you away from family responsibilities just for a minute?" he said teasingly.

"Instantly," she assured him.

"Good." With an arm at her waist, he steered her toward the door.

Outside, the night air was close to freezing, but the cold felt good after being surrounded by too many people and too much smoke for so many hours. "I told myself I was going to wait to give you this until the end of the evening, Caro . . . but I couldn't wait."

Her lips parted in surprise as he plucked a small velvet box from his pocket, and then she just looked at him. Love filled her eyes like the sheen of stars. "Oh, Alan. . ."

"Open it, love."

Her silly fingers were trembling, but she managed to part the stiff catch of the box. The yard light was brilliant, easily bright enough for her to see its contents—a ruby heart strung on the most fragile braided gold chain she'd ever laid eyes on. For a moment, she couldn't say a thing for the lump in her throat.

The gift was exquisite . . . but not what she was expecting.

"Like it?"

"It's beautiful. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen," she murmured truthfully. "I adore it, Alan."

"Let me put it on for you."

She obediently turned and closed her eyes as she felt his gentle hands fasten the clasp at the nape of her neck. Love swirled through her on about an equal level with despair. Her eyes stayed closed until she

was absolutely positive she wasn't going to cry.

After all this time, did he really want nothing more than an affair?

Friday night, seated at her kitchen table, Alan looked innocently unaware of the trap Carroll had set for him.

It didn't look like much of a trap, but then, that was the point. She'd served him ordinary beer as an appetitif, something he used to like before he got into tequila and champagne. She'd urged him to wear jeans and a sweat shirt—the kind of clothes they used to relax in after a hard week's work. The menu included no Spanish, Hungarian, or Tibetan delicacies. In fact, she'd whipped up a simple meat loaf and mashed potatoes, something he used to like before he got into cactus paddles.

Having set such a clever trap, she only wished she knew what it was for. All she wanted to do was talk to Alan after dinner, seriously talk. And somehow she hoped that would be easier if Alan hadn't changed quite as totally as she was afraid he'd changed.

Even so, she was both relieved and startled at Alan's reaction to the meal. He took one look, enthused, "Looks terrific!" and plunged in as if he'd just ended a four-week fast. More slowly, she settled in the chair across from him and passed a plate of steaming blueberry muffins.

"Caro, I'm going to weigh three hundred pounds after this meal," he scolded.

"Devil's food cake with chocolate frosting for dessert."

Alan insisted he would not touch the cake, but he did, although Caro had trouble managing her own, because by then Alan had lured her into his lap. He fed her pieces that were far too large, then licked the crumbs from her chin, then managed to steal bites from her plate. He also stole chocolate-flavored kisses.

And the whole time she was laughing, she was trying to find the right words to say. She didn't want to hurt him. She didn't want to destroy the relationship they had together.

She was just increasingly afraid that if she didn't say something soon, she was going to end up living in a barn with a man who wasn't her husband. That the place was going to be decorated in zebra stripes, sports cars were going to line the driveway, and out-of-wedlock children were going to be raised on cactus paddles and quail in thyme sauce.

"Alan?" she said finally.

He found yet another crumb on her chin and flicked it off with the pad of his thumb, following this up with a kiss. "Did I tell you I got tickets to the ballet in Chicago for next Tuesday?"

"Ballet?" She laughed because his nuzzling was tickling her, but the thought of another week of late nights made her feel exhausted before it had even started. "Alan, you hate the ballet."

"I love you, sweet."

"And I love you, but that's exactly what I'd like to talk to you about—ballets and dancing and . . ." She took a breath and tried to make her tone sound teasing, casual. "Alan, you know, there was a time when I thought you seriously disliked all those things—"

The phone jangled. She looked helplessly at Alan before sliding off his lap to answer it. Running a hand through her hair, she snapped an abrupt hello into the phone, then realized it was his answering service. "For you."

It wasn't the first time he'd left her number, and she knew well what a call in the evening meant. Still . . . she was the one who should have been upset. Instead, Alan leaped out of the chair as if his fanny had just connected with tacks, and alarm put a frantic glint in his eyes.

"Randy Jenkins," he said when he hung

up a few moments later. "I know darn well it's just another case of chicken pox, which I told his mother—"

"Alan, it's all right," she said soothingly as she fetched his coat. It wasn't all right, exactly, but their talk would just have to wait. One didn't date a pediatrician without knowing the pitfalls, and whining about spilled milk never put it back in the pail.



Bone tired hours later Alan pushed off the lights and climbed out of his car. Not a sound or movement disturbed the quiet street at this late hour. Jamming his hands in his pockets, head down against the cold, he aimed for his apartment door.

His memory was being buffeted by the smells of antiseptics, and Carroll. Of the look of a little boy finally peacefully sleeping in a hospital bed, and Carroll. Of parents too frightened to be rational, and Carroll. And the last thing he expected to find on climbing the three steps up to his door was . . . Carroll, a scarf wrapped around her throat and a white angora hat pulled low over her forehead.

He stopped dead, his heart pumping panic to every nerve ending. "Good Lord, what's wrong? You haven't been standing out here in this cold for lo—"

"I had to talk to you, and it wouldn't wait," she said crisply. "The child's all right, Alan?"

"Randy—yes. I . . ." He fumbled with his apartment key, and then hustled her inside ahead of him. While he stood in the hallway removing his jacket, she moved inside, switching on lamps and tugging off her hat and scarf. But he couldn't miss noting, when she perched on the edge of the couch, that she hadn't taken off her coat.

She didn't intend to stay. Anxiety hit his gut with all the delicacy of a Mack truck. "What's wrong?"

"A great deal, I'm afraid," she said qui-

etly. "I know you're tired. If you'd like me to make a pot of coffee—"

"No." Coffee wouldn't help. In fact, the smoothest of liquids probably couldn't push past the total dryness in his throat.

He'd been so sure it was working . . . and he'd come as close to being a romantic hero as he could. He thought she liked the new Alan. He'd liked some parts of the new image himself, but there wasn't a chance he could keep up the game for the next ninety years—even if he could stomach the food he'd been cooking, even if he could live with the impractical Fiero, even if he could manage to stay up night after night and still do a decent day's work the next day.

"Please sit down, would you?" He was just standing there, staring at her with those fathomless, gentle blue eyes of his. She sprang from the couch, as restless as a cat in a rainstorm and twice as miserable. She already knew she was going to make a mess of this. She could never say things well when she was upset, and she was unquestionably upset.

"Just say it, honey." Alan's voice was low.

She waved her hand helplessly, as if that could help her get the words out: "I thought . . . I always thought . . . I could be honest with you. From the day I met you, I thought we were capable of a special kind of honesty between us. Even from the very beginning, we could talk to each other—"

"We could and we can, Caro."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. I think I've been lying to you and you've been lying to me and—"

"I've never lied to you!" Alan said swiftly.

"No?" Her eyes were suddenly smarting with tears. "Then will you answer a few questions for me—with total honesty?"

His lungs released a sudden rush of air.

She was at least talking—and not walking out. “Of course.”

“They’re really very simple questions.”

Sticking her hands in her coat pockets, she tried to smile, and almost did. “For a Sunday dinner,” she said softly, “would you rather have a rib roast or squid in tomato sauce?”

Expecting the world to fall in, Alan wasn’t at all prepared for the irrelevant question.

“Rib roast.”

“Do you like dancing, Alan?”

“I—sometimes.” He couldn’t take his eyes off her white face.

“You promised to be honest.”

“Sometimes I like dancing. Caro—”

“And ballet? And nightclubs? And you really like sleeping on black satin sheets? You don’t find them . . . slippery? And the wild zebra spread, Alan, tell me how you picked that out because it suited you.”

He felt cornered at the end of a long corridor. “Sweetheart,” he said in a low voice, “maybe I’m not quite so fond of those things as I let on, but—”

“I think you hate all of them,” she said sadly. “And I finally figured out why you did all those things, Alan, why you’ve been lying to me.” She took a long breath. “You were tired of me, weren’t you? You wanted an affair, not marriage, not quiet evenings at home. The thing is, it would have been so much less painful if you’d just told me what you were feeling, that you really wanted and needed a very different kind of woman than I am. Because, Alan, I’m not—”

Talking was proving to be a terrible idea. Holing up in a corner to lick her wounds was a better one, much less humiliating. She made the three swift steps to the door before Alan sprang in front of her, his face gray with pain and his voice impossibly gentle. “You are dead wrong, kitten. I love you. And I did everything, Caro, everything because I was afraid of

losing you. I was trying to be . . . the man you needed in your life. The best way I knew how.”

She didn’t want to look at him; but his palms cupped her face, forcing her eyes to meet his. “But you were always that man. You never had to . . . make up things, or pretend, or . . .”

“But I did, Caro.” He took her hand, led her to the couch, and doused the light that was glaring in her eyes when she sank down. “Weeks ago,” he said gently, “I wanted to ask you to marry me. I didn’t because I was afraid you’d say no. I was a die-hard-fuddy-duddy in the making. Not a man who could keep your interest for the next ninety years and, just maybe, not someone I much wanted to be for the next ninety years, either.” His tone softened. “If I went too far, you have to understand that I was starting from scratch. A blank piece of paper. Because I’d never wanted a woman half as much as I wanted you.”

“Oh, Alan.” She sank against his chest, felt his arms wrap around her as if she were coming home. “I had no idea how you felt. And I never loved you for the razzle-dazzle. I loved you for you. You stole every inhibition I had, made me tell you every secret, made very sure I knew I was a passionate woman. You *forced* me to feel special, love . . . and I’m afraid you’ll have to pay the price now.”

“The price? Does that mean you’ll marry me?”

She opened her arms. “That’s what it means. Come here.” ♥

Carolina Moon

When Eileen Fergus Duffy, widowed mother of three, discovers her "phantom lover" Ryan O'Donnell dislikes kids, she decides to give him up. But the children and their mother work their way into Ryan's heart, and he soon finds himself longing to be part of their family.

JOAN DARLING

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Eileen Fergus Duffy stood before the worktable in her greenhouse and, with tender care, tamped the damp earth around the four-foot shefflera she had just repotted. Suddenly, the hair on the back of her neck prickled; she had a sensation that she was being watched. Startled, she glanced over her shoulder. Her lips parted in an exclamation of surprise.

A tall, broad-shouldered masculine figure filled the doorway, a camera dangling from a strap around his neck. His lips

curved in a wide grin. "Morning, ma'am. May I use your phone?" he said in a low, resonant drawl.

For a long moment, a bedazzled Fergie stared at him in silent wonder, unable to speak. Her gaze traveled from his handsome features, and sun-bronzed complexion to his lean, sinewy physique.

He looked vaguely familiar. She suddenly felt a jolt of recognition, and a thrill of joy surged through her. He had finally appeared—her phantom lover, the hero of

all her fantasies. The man she been waiting for, who'd sweep her off her feet. Fergie felt giddy and exhilarated, like a surfer riding the crest of a huge wave thundering toward shore.

His grin widened. "Name's Ryan. Ryan O'Donnell. I've leased the cottage next door. The agent said he'd meet me here at eight with the key, but he hasn't shown up. So if I could use your phone . . ."

Fergie's knees went weak. She nodded toward the far end of the table. "It's over there."

Her heart pounded with excitement as he started down the pebbled walkway with brisk, purposeful strides, ducking his head to avoid hanging baskets of ivy, fern, and impatiens.

Unaccountably, Fergie felt that simply by being in this man's presence she'd come back to life after a long absence. But that was ridiculous. The trouble was, she had been without a man for too long. After her husband's death, she had put love out of her life.

Now, five years after Keith's death, she realized that she had mourned enough and was ready to love again. Ryan O'Donnell had stepped straight from her dreams into her life. A small thrill tingled down her spine.

He quirked a brow at her littered worktable, then snatched up the phone, and dialed. With undisguised curiosity, Fergie listened till he dropped the phone back into its cradle.

"Realtor's on his way," Ryan said, fixing his admiring gaze on his new neighbor. He couldn't seem to stop looking at her. The sparkle lighting her tawny-gold eyes held him in a hypnotic spell.

Suddenly, under his intense gaze, Fergie was terribly self-conscious. Disconcerted, she wiped her moist brow with the back of her hand, leaving a smudge of dirt.

His eyebrows rose in question.

"You have a thing for plants, do you?"

Smiling at him, she curled her fingers into fists and thrust them under his nose, thumbs up. "Greenthumbs. Plants love me, and I love them. Keeping them healthy is what I do best." Proudly, she flung out an arm, taking in the warm, moist, peat-scented greenhouse. "The end result—Green Trees."

Ryan cocked his head at her, quirking an eyebrow. "Green Trees?"

"Green Trees. It's the way I make my living."

An incredulous expression lighted his fine brown eyes. "You make a living growing tropical plants here in South Carolina? Isn't that like growing blocks of ice in Alaska?"

She gave an emphatic shake of her head. "No way. I order all my plants from wholesalers and lease them to business offices, doctors, clubs, and private residences. 'Bring the outdoors inside'—that's my motto. Plants make any room come alive. I visit each client once or twice a week to feed and water the greenery."

She paused, waiting for Ryan to speak, but he remained silent, gazing at her with a look that made her heart soar. Finally she said, "Why are you staring at me?"

He started, as if she'd shattered a pleasant reverie. "Oh, I'm a photographer"—He patted his camera—"and I was just thinking how photogenic you are." He reached out and trailed a finger over her softly rounded cheeks.

Her cheeks tingled under his light touch, and her chest swelled with pleasure at his compliment.

"A professional photographer!" she exclaimed, elated. Her imagination soared as she envisioned Ryan taking a thousand and one pictures of her, which would soon grace the covers of *Vogue*, *Glamour*, and *Cosmo*.

Ryan shook his head, still smiling at her. "I do a lot of photography in my work, but actually I'm a scientist—a marine biologist and paleontologist. The Pelican Island Company hired me to set up a program to save the loggerhead sea turtle, a threatened species—" He broke off, his voice drowned out by the blast of a horn.

Through the doorway Fergie glimpsed a white Pelican Island Realty sedan rolling slowly down the blacktop road. Seconds later, another horn blast announced the arrival of the agent.

"Uh-oh, I think I'm being summoned," Ryan said. "Look, I don't start work till Monday. I came down a few days early to settle in and scout out the area." His voice turned deep, husky, urgent. "I need you to give me a guided tour of the island, show me around."

Fergie felt a sudden, overwhelming desire to show this fascinating stranger the entire world, but she had to decline. "Sorry. I have to make my rounds this morning. The tropics are dusty and thirsty."

He gave her a dazzling grin. "No problem. I'll ride along and help you. Then we'll take off. I'll be back in ten minutes. Don't leave without me!" Before she could protest further, he was gone.

With long, quick strides, he headed toward the cottage on the south side of Fergie's quaint white frame house, which was set well back from the shore road and sheltered on the north by tall pines and ancient live oaks bearded with gray-green moss. He noticed that beds of azaleas, calladiums; and other colorful plants surrounded her house. On the veranda hung a wooden swing that stirred in the crisp April air. Definitely an omen, he decided, an invitation to stay awhile.

A warm, welcoming feeling stole over him. This vibrant, intriguing woman promised to make his stay more exciting than he had ever imagined. Desire flowed through him, quickening his pulse as he

strode to his cottage.

Fergie scarcely had time to dash across the driveway to her house, slip into forest-green slacks and a Green Trees T-shirt, and run a comb through her russet curls before she heard Ryan pounding on the front door. Thank heaven Julie, Jamie and Jennifer, were spending spring break with their grandparents, or they'd all have rushed out to look him over. She raced downstairs and flung open the screen door.

Ryan stepped over the threshold. Instantly, from out of the shadowy hallway erupted a huge black shape, barking wildly, leaping up at him.

Startled, Ryan jumped back to the safety of the doorway. "Good Lord," he shouted. "What the hell kind of monster is that?"

"Sorry! That's Dylan, my watchdog." Fergie glanced down at the big black Labrador retriever, who had sat on his haunches smiling up at their new neighbor, as if asking his forgiveness for the fierce greeting.

"Let's go," Fergie said. Grinning, Ryan bent down and gave Dylan a friendly pat.

Fergie led Ryan out to her green and white mini van parked in the driveway.

He slid into the passenger side and draped an arm around the back of the seat. "Whom do we see first, Greenthumbs?"

Thoroughly disconcerted by his overwhelming presence, she blurted out, "My name isn't Greenthumbs. It's Eileen Fergus Duffy, but my friends call me Fergie."

He gave her a wicked sidelong glance. "Oh, but I hope to be much more than your friend."

Fergie's pulse raced, and her foot pressed hard on the gas pedal. What did he mean by that? She dared not ask, for fear she'd jinx the start of something wonderful. Firmly, she said, "First stop, the med-

ical center." With an effort, she kept her voice calm as she explained her routine to Ryan.

During the next hour or so, they tended plants at the medical center and several other places. Faster than she would have believed possible, they completed her rounds.

Back in the van, Ryan turned to her with a look of anticipation and something like a wolfish gleam in his melting brown eyes. "Now the grand tour, right?"

Her heart danced with delight. "Actually, the quickest way for you to get an overall view of the islands is to take the jeep safari. Tourists love it."

"Terrific! But I won't go unless you go with me." He wasn't about to let her out of his sight.

Much to her own surprise Fergie agreed, smiling. Minutes later, she parked the van before the Straw Market shopping plaza, where a tour guide was herding passengers aboard several garishly decorated jeeps.

Ryan took Fergie's elbow and guided her toward the last jeep. She felt a tremor of pure physical attraction surge through her as he eased onto the seat beside her and took her hand in his. Smiling down at her, he said, "Now, tell me all about this safari."

His thigh pressed against hers, and the warmth of his body enveloped her so that she could hardly think. In a shaky voice, she said, "Well, the guide shows visitors parts of the island that still look the way the whole island did until four years ago, when the causeway was built to the mainland. Now developers have taken over, building villas, condos, and cottages. Well, just watch."

Abandoning the paved roadways, the guide turned down a sandy lane toward an old plantation. The four-story house was built of black cypress set on a brick foundation.

Abandoned now, the plantation house was falling into decay. A regretful expression came over Ryan's face. "I hate to see an old homestead go to ruin." He smiled down at her. "Speaking of old houses, Fergie, you've kept yours in beautiful condition. That must be quite a job for . . . ah, for a woman alone."

"Thank you," Fergie said, smiling privately at his roundabout way of finding out if she was married. "I'm a widow," she explained. "My husband died five years ago. Heart attack."

A soft, compassionate look came over his face. "I'm sorry," he murmured sincerely.

Fergie's level gaze met his. "Now it's your turn," she said. "Have you ever been married?"

His dark eyes crinkled at the corners. "I've never even come close, I'm afraid. I guess I'm a born loner. A wanderer." His searching gaze lingered on her face. "But I don't want to hear about me, I want to hear about you."

"Well, after my husband died, my parents wanted me to move in with them, in Charleston, but I wanted to be independent, so I moved over here and decided to start my own business. I had to prove to everyone, but most of all to myself, that I could make it on my own."

He beamed down at her. "I see that you're enterprising as well as one of nature's wonders."

His eyes, gazing deeply into hers, seemed to say so much more than his words. She could feel her pulse pounding in her throat. Her eyes locked with his, and an electric current flowed between them, while unfamiliar and delicious vibrations began humming in the region of her heart.

The intimate moment was shattered by the loud cries of a flock of pelicans flying in V formation across the cloudless blue sky.

Moments later, they wound past wax myrtle and yellow cactus flowers blooming in bright patches as they bumped down a trail to the beach.

"There are miles and miles of shoreline," Fergie told him, "and this is a favored place for sea turtles to waddle ashore and scratch out protective holes for their eggs."

"My turf," Ryan said, obviously enjoying himself.

When the tour ended, the jeep train drew to a halt before the Straw Market. "I hope you enjoyed the safari," Fergie said, smiling.

Gazing deep into her eyes, Ryan said, "It was all I'd hoped it would be. Charming company, breathtaking scenery, a magical mood. But we have other places to explore." He nodded toward the cluster of rustic-looking shops and restaurants. "First we'll grab a bite to eat, then on to Charleston."

"No, really, I have to get back," she protested weakly.

"But you can't leave me to eat lunch alone my first day here! Besides, tell me just one thing you have to get back to on a sunny Thursday afternoon."

She gazed up into his eyes, thinking: Julie, Jamie, and Jennifer. She was so used to having to be home by three, when school got out, that she'd forgotten she had today and tomorrow free. Her lips curved in her most enchanting smile. "You're on!"

An hour and a half later, after a most pleasant lunch, they were in Charleston, walking around the historic parts of the town.

As they strolled arm in arm along the palm-tree-bordered Battery, she was terribly conscious of Ryan's lean, muscular figure striding beside her, making her feel small and fragile and protected. Not that she wanted or needed protecting, but like a parched gardenia thirsting for rain, she

thrived on the admiration of this debonair man. Besides, it was pleasant to feel cared for, after so many years of looking out for herself.

Totally absorbed in each other, they sauntered through White Point Gardens, then, slowly, they wended their way back to where the van was parked before a French restaurant. As Fergie started to climb inside, Ryan grasped her hand, pulling her back. Without bothering to ask her if she'd join him for dinner, he led her inside the restaurant. There, seated at an intimate, white-clothed table for two, graced by candlelight and a crystal vase of pink carnations, they sipped fine white wine and feasted on she-crab soup, shrimp etouffee, and Caesar salad.

As they lingered over coffee, Fergie said, "Now tell me all about Ryan O'Donnell. What do you do, exactly?"

"Oh, I'm sent on assignments by universities, museums, the National Geographic Society, and other institutions to do research. This time, it's the turtles. The Pelican Island Company wants me to stay here to run the loggerhead program after I set it up, but I plan to move on. Actually as I said before, I'm a perpetual transient. I love every minute of my freedom, the constant travel, meeting new people, the never-ending challenge." He smiled expansively. "My work is rewarding and exciting—and I love the lifestyle it entails."

Fergie's throat tightened. She regarded him soberly. "But aren't you awfully lonely? Most men your age are married . . ." She let her voice trail off.

He shook his head slowly, regretfully. "Marriage isn't for me, Greenthumbs. Especially since most marriages include having children."

Fergie almost choked. "Are you saying you don't like children?"

"That's right. Kids are fine for other people, but not for me. Anyway, I'm probably the world's fastest rolling stone,

so I'd make a bad father, wouldn't I?"

Shocked to the soles of her feet, she stared at him in disbelief. How could the man of her dreams not want children? A lump of disappointment lodged in her throat. She should have known Ryan O'Donnell was too good to be true.

Even so, why deny herself a romantic fling? The idea was deliciously dangerous. But she'd have to proceed with caution, for Ryan O'Donnell would be easy to love, and it would never do to fall in love with a rolling stone.

An hour later, in the bright spring moonlight, Ryan walked Fergie to her door. Swiftly, he bent his dark head, and his lips brushed her cheek in a light kiss.

In low, husky tones he said, "Good night, Greenthumbs. Thank you for a memorable day. I'll see you tomorrow!" And with one brief, burning glance into her eyes, he turned and was gone.

Fergie shut the door behind her and leaned against it, eyes closed. What was the matter with her? Why should she feel let down that he hadn't really kissed her when reason told her to take care not to become too involved with this man who wanted no ties? She was impossible. Shaking her head, she murmured, "Oh, Ryan O'Donnell, you are far too attractive! Tomorrow," she told herself firmly, "I will tend my own garden. And I will let my handsome rolling stone roll on!"

But all her resolutions crumbled when, early the next morning, as she was working in the greenhouse, Ryan came by in a rented red jeep and announced to her that he was taking her for a ride.

A small voice in the back of her mind shouted a warning. She had no intention of courting danger by spending two delightful days in a row with this devastatingly attractive man. Instead, she heard herself asking, "Where to?"

"I just want to show you this pretty garden. Supposedly, it's one of America's

oldest man-made attractions."

"Ryan, are you talking about Magnolia Plantation?"

"That's right. We can go around and see the gardens, have a leisurely lunch, and, in the afternoon, paddle a canoe through the waterfowl refuge."

"Ryan, it's going to take us all day to do this place justice."

His mouth quirked at the corners; evidently, he was curbing a smile. "I hope so. Anyway, while you're doing this, you won't be doing anything else."

Fergie felt a sinking sensation inside as all her fine resolutions went winging through the air with the birds and she heard herself saying, "Well, okay. But I have to be home by five."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Why? Got a date?"

She hesitated. Should she tell him now that she had three kids who would be arriving on her doorstep at five? No. Why not let him think she had a date? "Yes. I have a date," she said.

"In that case, I may not take you home at all."

Through narrowed lids, she shot him a venomous glare. "I won't say what I'm thinking, Ryan."

"Don't even think it!" he laughed.

What Ryan was thinking was that he was on the verge of a momentous discovery. Fergie promised to be like no other woman in the world. Elation surged through him as his lips curved in smiling anticipation.

They toured the plantation house, downed a quick lunch at the snack shop, and then Ryan led Fergie to the boat landing, where he rented a bright red canoe.

Soon they were following the canoe trail through dark, mirrored waters that reflected luxuriant stands of azaleas and camellias. After a while, Ryan eased the paddles inside the boat and moved to sit in

the center. He clasped Fergie's hands in his and eased her down beside him. Gradually, imperceptibly, they drifted farther downstream in the dim, dappled-green shade. Fergie shivered slightly in the cool spring air. Instantly, Ryan curved an arm around her shoulders, drawing her close to his side.

Tenderly, he clasped her hand in his. "Do you know you have lovely hands? Long, graceful hands, good for growing things—and for loving." He raised her hand to his lips, kissing each pale, polished fingertip with tender solemnity.

For a reason she couldn't fathom, she found his simple gesture breathtakingly intimate. She entwined her fingers in his. She felt his lips brush her brow, her eyelids, and lifted her face to his.

In low, reverent tones, Ryan said, "Fergie, you're so desirable. I want you so much . . ."

Before she could speak, his mouth closed over hers, his tongue tasting, teasing, tempting. He pulled her tight against his chest. She wound her arms around his neck and ran her fingers through his hair.

He kissed her again and again, and all her pent-up longing to love and be loved poured forth with an ardor that matched his own.

They lay entranced, entwined in each other's arms for some time, until at length a sudden jarring of the canoe roused them. Startled, they sat up, staring around them. The boat had bumped against a thick reed bank. With a final kiss on the tip of Fergie's nose, Ryan eased back onto his seat in the stern. Quickly, she returned to the bow and they paddled back.

The sun had paled, and soft shadows were settling around Fergie's house when, shortly after six, they rattled up the driveway in the jeep.

"Good Lord!" Ryan exclaimed, braking the jeep to a jerking halt. "Look what

washed ashore with the tide!"

Fergie followed his stunned gaze to her front steps. With an indignant toss of her head, she said stiffly, "They were not washed ashore with the tide."

Three children were staring suspiciously at the stranger behind the wheel of the jeep. But as Fergie climbed down, they gave a shout of recognition, dashed down the walk, and flung themselves into her arms, all yelling at once.

"Mama, where have you been? Grandma dropped us off an hour ago, and you said you'd be here!"

"Where'd you get the neat jeep? Can we ride in it?"

"I'm hungry. When do we eat?"

Fergie hugged each child in turn, then swung to face Ryan, who sat behind the wheel as though transfixed. Standing straight and proud, she said, "Ryan, I'd like you to meet my children."

Mingled surprise and disbelief filled his earnest brown eyes. "Your kids?"

"My kids. Jennifer, fourteen going on twenty-four. Jamie, nine. And Julie, five and a half. They've been visiting their grandparents in Charleston." She turned to the children, and beaming fondly down at them said, "This is Mr. O'Donnell, our new next-door neighbor. He's here to do some research on loggerhead turtles. You can say hello, but then you'd better scoot inside and wash up. I'll be in in a minute to start supper."

Dutifully, politely, they greeted Ryan, and after Fergie gave them the key, they trooped across the veranda and inside the house, slamming the screen door behind them.

Ryan shook his head as if reeling from a stunning blow. "You have three kids!"

Fergie scowled. "Am I not speaking clearly?"

"What I mean is it's a shock to hear that you, whom I'd begun to think of as a kindred spirit, have three children, be-

cause"—he paused and drew a deep breath,—"because I myself have no siblings, have never been around children, do not understand children, and have no rapport with them whatsoever."

Fergie accepted this news in long, thoughtful silence. Finally, she gave a pitying toss of her head. "How boring."

His eyebrows rose in astonishment. "Boring?"

"Boring," she said flatly, throwing out her hands in a disdainful gesture. "Life without kids."

Testily, Ryan replied, "My work provides all the excitement I need."

She could feel her dander rising. "Then you'd better have at it." She spun away from him and stalked into the house, slamming the screen door after her. Once inside, she flung herself down on a chair, feeling as though she were sinking into the slough of despond, for a man who could not love children could be no phantom lover for Eileen Fergus Duffy.

Shortly after eight on Sunday morning, Ryan lay in bed, a broad smile curving his lips as he dreamed impossible dreams. Suddenly, there came a grinding roar, followed by what sounded like a muffled gunshot.

He leaped out of bed and dashed to the window. A faded blue station wagon was churning down the road, and newspapers were hurtling from the window onto his neighbors' lawns. He gave a relieved grin. The "gunshot" had been his own paper, landing with a loud thud on the stone walk.

If there was one thing his heart loved, it was his Sunday morning newspaper. Without pausing to throw on a robe over his red and white striped pajamas, he dashed outside to retrieve it.

Halfway down the walk, he stopped short, looking around him in bewilderment. His Sunday morning paper had van-

ished. Gone. Nowhere to be seen. He glanced the other way, at Fergie's lawn. No Sunday paper lay waiting there. Suspicion kindled and grew inside him. The kids probably had taken his paper and were enjoying it now.

Eyes narrowed, jaw thrust forward, he charged across the yard to Fergie's house and pounded on the screen door. The inside door was standing ajar. Though he saw no one, a small voice from the dark, shadowy hall peeped, "Who is it?"

He looked down. Fergie's younger daughter was peering up at him through the screen. He forced a smile. "I'm Ryan O'Donnell, your next door neighbor, whom you met yesterday. Please go and get your mommy."

Fergie, evidently overhearing the conversation, came to the door. Eyeing him warily, she asked, "What's on your mind, Ryan?"

Feeling horribly conspicuous standing on her veranda in his pajamas, he said, "Mind if I step inside?"

Good grief, thought Fergie, amazed. Kids or not, he must be dying to see her, for why else would he be here? She pushed open the screen door and motioned him inside.

"I have a small mystery on my hands," Ryan said, stepping inside the doorway. "My Sunday morning paper has disappeared. Have you seen it?"

A sharp stab of disappointment pricked her heart. He hadn't been overwhelmed with passion to see her after all. He just wanted her to find his paper. She bit her lip, gazing up at him.

"No," she said patiently, "I haven't seen it."

He glanced over her shoulder, down the hall into the kitchen, from which came the delicious smell of coffee brewing and bacon frying and the sound of childish voices raised in argument. There would also be a morning paper strewn over the table-

top, he surmised.

"May I read your paper when you've finished with it?"

Fergie gave a regretful shake of her head. "Sorry, I canceled our subscription weeks ago. I just don't have time to read it. By the way, Ryan, while you were scouting around out there, you didn't see the dog, did you? He sneaked out earlier, and he hasn't shown up for his morning toast."

With wry humor, Ryan said, "No, I haven't seen him. Don't tell me he left home without his American Express card."

Julie, peering out from the shelter of her mother's slender hip said softly, "I know where Dylan is. He's in the parlor."

Fergie let out a relieved sigh. "Thank goodness!"

She turned and walked into the parlor, Ryan on her heels.

For a long moment, there was utter silence; then, furiously Ryan burst out, "Oh, Lord, the damn beast!"

Fergie let out a horrified gasp. The Sunday paper lay strewn around the room as if flung about by hurricane winds. Instantly, Dylan leaped to his feet, dashed to Ryan, and began licking his hand.

Hot waves of embarrassment singed Fergie's cheeks as she threw out her hands in an apologetic gesture. "Oh, I'm so sorry. You see, when we were taking the paper, Dylan always brought it in. He must have spotted your paper lying on the ground next door and thought it was his duty to retrieve it." She paused, waiting for Ryan to speak.

Hands planted on his hips, he gazed at her miserably. Finally, he nodded. "I understand," he conceded through clenched teeth, "but my paper is still gone." He bent down and began to gather the sections of his ravaged paper. Fergie went to the doorway and shouted down the hall: "Troops! Call to arms!"

The next moment, Jennifer and Jamie

burst into the room.

"Let's get this paper picked up," Fergie snapped. "And put the sections back together in order."

They all fell to, gathering up the pages. Fergie shot Ryan a comforting smile and a brusque comment died on his lips. An electric current of attraction arced between them, and tension tightened his stomach. Suddenly, the crazy thought popped into his mind that along with his paper, he'd like to take Fergie home with him.

"How about a cup of coffee, a slice of toast, a bit of bacon?" Fergie asked.

Jennifer jumped to her feet, and said brightly, "I'll make pancakes."

Ryan glanced at Fergie, then at Jennifer, then back to Fergie. He started to tell her that he never, ever ate breakfast and that all he wanted to do was go home and read his paper. But gazing into Fergie's bright eyes, it struck him that he did not want to go home. He wanted to stay here with her. A broad grin lighted Ryan's deeply tanned features. "You've made me an offer I can't refuse."

Seated at the round table in the country-style kitchen, everyone gobbled down Jennifer's pancakes, which were light, golden perfection. Ryan clearly enjoyed them, devouring a second and third stack with gusto.

Jamie eyed him narrowly, watching him wolf down a fourth stack. "You must be starving!" he said.

Swiftly, Fergie broke in, "Jamie, darling, accepting another helping is a great compliment to the cook. You yourself had seconds—in fact, we all love Jennifer's pancakes."

Ryan paused, his fork in midair, beaming at Jennifer. "And we love Jennifer's bacon, eggs, toast, and coffee, as well." Not to mention Jennifer's adorable mother, he added silently.

If he'd said he loved Jennifer, she

couldn't have looked happier, and for a short time all seemed to be going well. To well, thought Fergie uneasily. The children were acting almost human. The only problem was with herself. She was having trouble keeping her eyes off Ryan's muscular arms and broad chest.

Ryan, too, couldn't keep his eyes off her. He felt an insane compulsion to reach across the table and touch her.

Thankfully, his mind was taken off Fergie, when Julie, who had been inspecting Ryan's jaw with grave attention, said accusingly, "You didn't wash your face this morning."

"Dummy!" Jamie shouted, laughing. "That's not dirt, it's five o'clock shadow!"

Julie stuck out her tongue at him. "It's not five o'clock, dummy. Can't you even tell time?"

As their bickering continued, Ryan decided it was time for him to go. He pushed back his chair and got to his feet. He gave Fergie a ravishing smile, and in his deep, drawling voice that never failed to send tiny shivers up her spine, he said, "Thanks for breakfast. Sorry I was so grumpy over the paper."

Dismayed that the children had put him off, she forced a cheerful grin. "Forget it. The whole thing was Dylan's fault."

"I know, but I should've been more understanding."

Hurriedly, he made his escape, back to his bachelor pad, and sank down on his island of safety, his reclining armchair. Torn by conflicting emotions, he reviewed the morning. Although he'd had fun with Fergie and her kids, he knew he could not get involved with Eileen Fergus Duffy, or her offspring or her dog. Bachelorhood was the only way of life for him. He would not see her again. That decision made, he considered the matter resolved, and settled back to read his paper in peace and quiet.

As she cleared the table, Fergie admitted that there had been something terribly disturbing about Ryan sitting across from her at the breakfast table. He was probably the most seductive man she'd ever met.

She let her gaze wander to Jennifer, who stood before a mirror fluffing her long, curly cinnamon-colored hair. A moonstruck expression came over the girl's face as she smiled at her reflection.

"Mama, Ryan really loved my pancakes. I think we should ask him over for dinner tonight."

"Mister O'Donnell, to you, lovey," said Fergie, amused. "And I think he had enough family togetherness."

Jamie said in disgusted tones, "Ryan sure had enough of Dylan. He doesn't know much about dogs."

Julie said, "I like him! He has eyes like apple butter, so soft and dark and shiny." Her brow puckered in thought. "Mama, if Daddy's never coming back, why can't Ryan be our father?"

"No!" The reply was much louder and sharper than Fergie intended.

"But he lives right next door. Isn't that near enough?"

Fergie bent down and kissed Julie's bright red curls. "Julie, honey, I don't think we're his cup of tea."

Jamie gave a derisive hoot. "Ha! I bet he doesn't even drink tea. I bet he drinks beer!"

"We don't care what he drinks!" said Fergie savagely. "We probably won't ever see him again—except in passing." The very thought of never seeing him again brought on an instant attack of the mean reds. Grim faced, she marched upstairs to her room. She slapped a cold cloth on her head and flopped down on her bed. Nothing, but nothing, was working out as she had envisioned in her romantic fantasies.

Fergie had just finished loading the

clothes washer two days later when she heard a vigorous knocking on the screen door, followed by Ryan's loud, cheerful drawl drifting down the hallway.

"Hey there! Anybody home?"

Fergie forced herself to walk, not run, down the hall and hold the door wide. "Come in, come in."

Strangely, Ryan hung back. "No, no. I—uh—" His expression turned slightly sheepish. "The fact is, I need a favor. I need to borrow something."

Fergie laughed to herself, thinking how transparent Ryan was. Borrowing was just an excuse to see her. Elated, she nodded vigorously. "What do you need? Sugar? Butter? Flour . . . ?"

He averted his gaze from her lovely, smiling face. "Uh, not exactly . . . I need to borrow a child."

Fergie's eyes widened as she gazed earnestly into his face. "You want to borrow a child?"

He nodded sheepishly. "I need someone I can hoist up to my kitchen windowsill. Someone who can push up the window, scramble inside, climb over the sink, then open the door and let me in. The fact is, I'm locked out. I think Jamie could do it."

She shook her head, trying not to laugh. Then she called up the stairs, "Jamie, will you come here, please? Mr. O'Donnell needs you."

Jamie bounded down the stairs. In grown-up tones, as if they were contemporaries, he asked, "What can I do for you, Ryan?"

"I need someone to climb through my kitchen window and let me in the front door."

Jamie regarded him soberly, then said matter-of-factly: "Let's get rolling."

Before they were out of sight, Fergie had a gut feeling that she should go along. But she really wanted Jamie to have a chance to know Ryan, to do something

nice for him, and to show him that kids were okay. Besides, she needed to start dinner.

She had just put potatoes in the oven to bake when she heard someone pounding on the screen door. Ryan couldn't be back again, could he? She ran down the hall but at the door, she let out an astonished gasp. A blue-uniformed officer of the Island Security Guard stood on the stoop.

"Officer Mike Spink, ma'am. Mind if I step inside?"

She backed into the hallway. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"I'm afraid so, lady." He jerked his head toward Ryan's cottage. "My partner and I just picked up two burglars—alleged burglars—breaking and entering next door."

"Oh, no!" cried Fergie, aghast.

"The man says he lives there—but that's what all the burglars say. Says he's locked out and borrowed this little kid to climb inside and open the door. Some people will stoop to anything. Well, my partner and me, we got them stashed away in our patrol car. We'll take them into town and book 'em for breaking and entering."

Julie, who had just rushed in with Jennifer, cried, "Mama, is he going to put Jamie in jail?"

The officer stood gaping down at Julie. "This Jamie, is he a friend of yours?"

"No!" shrieked Julie. "He's not my friend, he's my brother! Ryan is my friend. He lives next door."

At that moment, Ryan burst through the doorway, wild-eyed and panicky, shouting, "Officer, this woman can tell you I'm not a burglar!"

Fergie fixed the policeman with her most winning smile. "Officer Spink, I can vouch for Mr. O'Donnell. He does live next door, and he is locked out of his house."

Disbelief filled the officer's voice. "Locked out is all, huh?"

Fergie nodded, then moved toward the door, easing the officer over the threshold. "Good-bye, Officer Spink. Thanks for stopping over."

After the policeman left Ryan turned to Fergie and placed both hands on her shoulders.

"Fergie, darling, you are a true friend—tried and true. You undoubtedly saved me from being thrown in the slammer. I want you to know I'll be forever grateful."

"Ryan," Fergie burst out angrily, "do you realize that that man was going to take Jamie to the police station and book him?"

Ryan laughed. "Come on, Fergie, lighten up. It's all straightened out. It's okay."

"It's not okay! A nine-year-old child in trouble with the law, with practically a police record! Oh; this is a fine kettle of fish, Ryan O'Donnell!"

At that moment, Jamie shot through the front door. Taking one look at his enraged mother, he skidded to a stop behind Ryan's broad back and poked him in the ribs.

"What's up?" he whispered.

Ryan raised a hand to shield his lips and muttered, "I think I'm in trouble."

Jamie crooked a finger at Ryan. When Ryan bent down, Jamie whispered, "How'd you like me to show you where the loggerhead turtles nest?"

Thinking it might be best to disappear for a while and let Fergie cool down, Ryan put a hand on Jamie's shoulder and in a conspiratorial whisper replied, "There's nothing I'd like better. Lead the way, Jamie."

He turned to Fergie, who stood in frosty silence. Softly, he said, "See you later," and bolted out the door after Jamie.

Side by side, Ryan and Jamie jogged down the blacktop road past weathered gray beach cottages, then turned onto a rough, white-sand track. At length they

passed a row of dunes and emerged on the sandy shore.

Jamie halted and flung out an arm toward a wide expanse of beach beyond the high dunes. "This is the best place to find turtles. Every year the loggerheads come, must be a hundred of them, waddling up from the sea. They dig holes as big as a basketball, lay their eggs, then go back to the sea."

Ryan gazed about him, surveying the terrain. "What we'll do is build wooden lookout platforms at intervals along the shore where we can watch for them. The company has hired students for beach patrols to monitor the crawls."

"I can monitor, too," said Jamie. "I'll come and get you the minute they lumber up on the shore. It always happens at night, but it's worth staying up late to watch them lay their eggs."

Touched, Ryan felt that Jamie, by sharing his knowledge of the nesting grounds and offering to help monitor the crawls, had given him a rare and lovely gift. Ryan pursed his lips. When the kid grew up, he might turn out to be a real person.

Later on, in the privacy of his home, Ryan found himself thinking fondly of the camaraderie he'd felt with Jamie Duffy. Sternly, he reminded himself that Jamie was still a child, and children meant big trouble. Delightful as Jamie's mom was, and much as he loved to be with her, he prized his freedom more. In loud, forceful tones he declared: "I will not pursue Eileen Fergus Duffy one step farther!"

Next Sunday morning, Ryan was awakened at dawn by noise coming from Fergie's house. Warily, he rolled out of bed and slipped on a pair of chino shorts.

He opened the blinds and peered out. Fergie and the kids were running in and out of the house like actors in a fast-forward TV commercial. They were loading the van—not with plants to be delivered,

as he might have expected, but with jugs and coolers and buckets. Ryan frowned. What were they up to? It was too cold to swim and too early to go on a picnic.

He strode out of the house and through the heavy, humid-early dawn air, across his dew-drenched lawn to Fergie's driveway. "It's only human," he told himself, "to want to know what's going on."

As he approached the van, he saw Fergie disappear inside the house, trailed by Jamie and Julie. Jennifer slammed the van doors shut and swung to face him. Mingled pleasure and surprise suffused her piquant features. "Ryan! What are you doing up at the crack of dawn?"

"Oh, I just happened to wake up early this morning, and I—ah—just happened to notice you all were taking off, and I wondered . . ." He let his voice trail off.

Jennifer's eyes widened as she gazed up into his face. "Oh, right. We're heading out for Duck Creek. It's sort of a family tradition. Every year at this time, we go crabbing." She hesitated, fluffing her mass of hair and fluttering her eyelashes. "Would you like to go with us?" she asked, smiling brightly.

Ryan thought fast, and the image of him and Fergie and her kids driving off together to some isolated marshland before the rest of the world was awake warmed his blood. He took a deep breath. "I'd love to go crabbing with you all."

Just then Fergie, Julie, and Jamie trooped out of the house and headed toward the van. "Mama!" Jennifer cried gaily, "Guess what. Ryan's going with us!"

Fergie stopped short, looking from Ryan to Jennifer and back to Ryan.

"Mind if I tag along?" Ryan asked.

She hesitated, her pulse racing, her heart pumping crazily. She was dying for him to tag along, but she couldn't see Ryan crabbing with three excited kids whooping, shouting, and jumping up and down. They'd probably drive him up the

wall. On top of it, she was drawn to him more than ever. Spending the morning at his side would be torture.

But she didn't have the heart to refuse him. His dark, soft eyes were shining with eager anticipation. Slowly, her lips curved in a wide gamine grin.

It was all the answer he needed. He raced back to his cottage, pulled on a T-shirt, draped his camera around his neck, and clapped a straw hat on the back of his head. Moments later, he slid into the van beside Fergie. With an air of cheerful optimism, he smiled across at her.

"You know, I have a gut feeling that today is going to be like no other day in my entire life."

Laughing, Fergie said, "I have a gut feeling you're right!"

Indeed, it turned out to be quite a memorable day. The children fussed and fought over Ryan's attention, as he snapped pictures of everyone, and learned how to tell female from male crabs. He seemed relaxed enough, but Fergie was sure that he was thoroughly bored with them all and was just putting on a show in order to please her.

When they got back home, Jennifer asked Ryan to come for supper and help them eat the crabs they had caught. Fergie was sure he'd decline the invitation but, to her surprise, he accepted eagerly.

Fergie sighed inwardly. Was there no escaping their charming neighbor? Ryan trailed after her like a shadow, assaulting her senses, awakening desires that she couldn't suppress. Sternly, she told herself she had better steer clear of him before she found herself in deep trouble. But how could she avoid him when he was living right next door?

On the stroke of six, the kids trooped into the kitchen with Ryan in their midst. Fergie could feel his eyes watching her as

she set a huge enamel kettle on top of the stove. She added water, a cup of beer, Back Bay seasoning, and a sprinkling of pepper, and when it was steaming, threw in the crabs and plopped on the lid. Abruptly, she swung away from the stove and almost collided with Ryan. "Oops, sorry!"

Startled, he grabbed up his camera and cocked it—but not before she had seen the adoring look in his eyes.

Jennifer, Jamie, and Julie set the table while Ryan snapped dozens of pictures. The tangy odor of mingled salt air, spices, and crabs wafted temptingly around the room.

When Fergie heaped a pile of crimson crabs on a tray and set them on the table, it seemed the most natural thing in the world for Ryan to sit down with them and dig in. But soon she realized that this evening would probably finish it with Ryan. Jennifer flirted with him overtly, while Julie insisted on showing him her extensive shell collection. The whole meal was messy, the children grew noisy, and Ryan, she thought, was probably cringing inside at their manners and lifestyle.

It was after ten by the time Fergie hustled Julie off to bed and kissed all the kids good night. When Ryan said he really should go, she was not surprised. He'd been a good sport and she didn't blame him for wanting to cut out.

She led him down the hall, through the door, and onto the veranda.

Strangely, he seemed in no hurry to leave. Suppressing a sigh, Fergie sank down on the swing. Softly, she said, "Ryan, I'm sorry if you've had a rotten day, but this is the way we are and—"

Ryan spun to face her, his expression incredulous. "Rotten!" He sat down on the swing beside her, taking her hands in his. "You're wrong, so wrong. I had a fantastic time! I loved crabbing, and then binging on steamed crabs. And I was

touched that Julie wanted to show her shells to me."

His words gave her little comfort, for Fergie knew he was simply being gallant. It was his nature.

Ryan gave a nudge with his foot that set the swing gently rocking. Then he caught sight of an ancient radio perched on a windowsill. "Enough talk," he said cheerily. "Let's have a little night music." He flicked on the radio, twirling the knob to an "easy listening" station.

Suddenly, she wished he would go, for the moonlight, the soft, jasmine-scented air, the music flowing around them, gave the night a romantic aura that made her think thoughts she shouldn't be thinking—dangerous, romantic fantasies.

She was terribly aware of his nearness. Her heartbeat quickened, echoing the pounding of the surf upon the shore.

The swing slowed, drifted to a stop. Soft music swirled around them. Just when Fergie thought she couldn't bear to sit so close to Ryan for another second, he held out his arms to her and said lightly, "Dance, anyone?"

With a quick, graceful motion, Fergie rose from the swing. Ryan swept her into his arms and, holding her right hand snugly in his left, curved his free arm about her waist. She leaned back, inclining her head slightly, and saw him gazing down at her with such an intense, tender expression that her heart swelled with happiness. Then, almost imperceptibly the music segued into "Carolina Moon."

The words drifted languidly through her mind as Fergie hummed the romantic tune. A small shiver swept through her as she felt Ryan's lips close to her ear, murmuring the words. Of its own volition, her head moved slightly and her lips met his, clinging, exploring, seeking a response. He released her hand and locked both arms around her waist, pulling her close against his hard, muscular body. She stret-

ched upward, twining her arms about his neck, pressing her lithe, slender figure closer, ever closer, until their hearts beat as one.

All thought left her. She reveled in the feel of his strong arms holding her, wishing he'd never let her go and that this night would never end. Locked in each other's arms, unaware that the music had ended, they continued to rock back and forth as if drifting on an undulating sea.

Finally Ryan moaned. "Ah, Fergie, on those lonely nights when I was far away on some desolate island, I used to dream of holding someone like you in my arms."

Smiling into his eyes, she said softly, "And I've dreamed of someone like you, Ryan O'Donnell—" Abruptly, she stopped, struck with a thought: And I've been waiting all this time for you to come and carry me away. Now at last you've come—but you will never carry me away. The thought jolted her into action. Bracing her hands against his shoulders, she pushed away from him.

Ryan was startled. "Fergie, what's wrong?"

She tried to keep her voice low and calm. "I'm not going to let you get close to me, Ryan. You're a rolling stone. I don't want to be hurt, and I don't want my kids to be hurt when you walk out of our lives, so we'd better just cool it."

He looked as though she'd struck him.

His voice, sharp with hurt, stabbed like a knife between her shoulderblades. "What you're saying is, I might as well go right now."

In choked tones, she replied, "For all intents and purposes . . ."

"Okay, I'll go! I'm not hanging around a woman who thinks I'm wasting her time."

Without another look, another word, he strode across the veranda and down the steps into the darkness. As the sound of his footsteps died away, she sank down on

the swing and covered her face with her hands.

After their harsh parting, Fergie went to bed devastated, regretting her words. She woke up at dawn feeling even more depressed. Maybe jogging would lift her spirits. Quietly, so as not to wake the kids, she slipped out of the house, crossed the road, and emerged on the sea-swept beach.

Veering north along the deserted crescent shore, she jogged with a steady, rhythmic gait feeling terribly alone. She lifted her head defiantly, focusing her eyes on the rising sun.

Her attention was distracted by a figure in the distance far ahead. She rounded the eastern curve of the shore where the sun, now a violent red-orange disc, was climbing a milk-white sky. In the shimmering air far up the beach, the stranger stood staring out to sea. Suddenly, as though sensing he was being watched, he turned and began striding rapidly toward her.

She kept up her steady pace, and as the distance between them lessened, the golden-browed figure broke into a run. A camera dangled from a strap around his neck. With all the speed she could muster, Fergie raced toward him.

As the distance closed between them, he opened his arms wide, and she flung herself into them, pressing her cheek against his hard, muscled shoulder. His arms tightened around her, hugging her close. In low, emotion-choked tones, he said, "Ah, Fergie, darling, I couldn't sleep all night for thinking of you—of us."

Her eyes stung with unbidden tears. Wordlessly, she wound her arms around his neck and lifted her face to his. His mouth closed over hers, his kiss a balm to soothe the bruising words they'd said last night. And when he would have released her, she held his head firmly between her

long, slender palms and claimed his lips with her own.

Her kiss told him all he wanted to know—that she, too, was eager to forget the hurtful things they'd said last night, that she, too, wanted to start over.

Clinging together, arms wrapped about each other, they sank to the cool sand.

Fergie looked at Ryan, a baffled expression in her eyes. "What are we going to do?" she asked tremulously.

He pulled her closer, his arms tightening in an understanding hug. "Not to worry, my darling. We simply make a pact to keep our—" he paused, groping for the right word—"relationship strictly platonic. That will keep us out of trouble. And we'll make it clear to the kids that we're friends and no more, that we're simply enjoying each other's company."

Slowly, Fergie shook her head. "I don't think it'll work, Ryan."

"Listen, Fergie, I want to play fair. I can't get you out of my mind. I think of you night and day, and all I want is to be with you. But I know myself. I'm just not cut out to be domesticated. Married life isn't for me. I'd feel trapped."

An aching hurt rose inside her, then spread throughout her body. "You're right Ryan. It would never work, you and I together." Sadly, she shook her head. "Never in a million years."

He clasped her hands in his, holding them tightly. "All the more reason for us to take advantage of the time we have left together, for making every minute count. So give our pact a try. Okay?"

Fergie laughed to hide the ache in her heart, but she was thinking, Why not give his pact a try? At least she'd see him, and they would have fun together.

She looked up into Ryan's eyes. "Okay. We'll give it a try."

Slowly, they stood and began strolling along the shore, splashing in the nippy surf, laughing, talking. Fergie's heart

swelled with happiness. It was marvelous to be friends again!

Absorbed in each other, they walked on, rounding a curve in the shore, where the beach was strewn with shells. Ryan bent down and picked one up. "Look at this—a perfect sand dollar. Must be five inches across." He handed it to Fergie. "Keep it for me, will you?"

Touched, she gazed down at the sand dollar. "Thanks, Ryan, I'll treasure it always," she said.

His quirky brows flew up. "It's not for you. It's for another woman."

Fergie felt something green and unlovely uncoil inside her. In brisk tones, she said, "I'm heading back to the house. Have to see the kids off to school."

"I'll come along," agreed Ryan amiably. "Have to see that Ryan gets off to work."

Julie met them at the front door and in scolding tones, like an irate mother, said, "Mama, you're late."

Turning to Fergie, Ryan held out a hand. "May I have my shell, please, ma'am?"

Without a word, Fergie slid the sand dollar from her pocket and put it in Ryan's open palm.

He knelt down and, taking hold of Julie's hand, opened it and placed the shell on her palm. "It's yours."

"Mine!" Julie shouted. "Mine to keep?" Smiling into her eyes, Ryan nodded. "I thought you'd like to have it for your collection."

Fergie felt a sudden lump rise in her throat.

Still clutching the shell, Julie threw her arms around Ryan's neck. He could feel his face burning, and something warm and buttery inside. "Uh, look, Fergie, I've got to run," he said rising quickly. "But I'll see you tonight, okay?"

Reluctantly, she shook her head. "Sorry. Not tonight. I have to go to open

school night at the grade school. I need to see Jamie and Julie's teachers."

For a long moment, Ryan stared at her, saying nothing.

When at last he spoke, he sounded disgruntled and out of sorts. "I'll call you." The next moment, he was striding through the door, across the veranda, and down the steps, out of sight.

Suppressing a sigh, Fergie squared her shoulders and marched down the hall to the kitchen.

Several hours later, Ryan, relaxing in his recliner, heard a loud roar, then a sudden screeching of brakes that made him leap to his feet. He dashed to the window and yanked up the blind. Peering across at Fergie's driveway, he let out a loud groan. "Oh, good grief!"

The van doors burst open and Fergie flew out, followed by Jamie and Julie, all of them meticulously groomed and colorfully dressed.

They ran around the van and came to a sudden stop behind the right rear wheel. There they stood in silent dismay, surveying something he couldn't see.

Without further thought, Ryan bolted out his front door and dashed across the yard to the stranded little group.

Fergie, recalling his lack of enthusiasm over her commitment to attend open school night, forced a light, casual tone.

"Ryan, we were just on our way over to the school, and now we have this flat tire

"It has a nail in it," Jamie explained helpfully.

Ryan nodded at the white metal case on the back of the van. "You have a spare in there?"

"Forget that," Jamie said dryly. "The spare has a cut in it. Mama, you were going to drop it off to be fixed, when you had time."

Fergie's golden eyes widened. "I did

drop it off—but I forgot to pick it up."

Ryan nodded sympathetically. "I understand."

Julie, twisting her hands together, wailed, "Oh, what are we going to do?"

"We are all going to get in my jeep and drive to your school," Ryan declared.

He struck out toward his driveway with Fergie, Jamie, and Julie in his wake, running to keep up with his long strides. They piled into the jeep, and Ryan rocketed down the white sand roads through the hot, sultry night as if their salvation depended on speed. Ten minutes later, he pulled up before the side entrance of the one-story beige brick school.

Fergie and her kids clambered down from the jeep. "How long will you be?" Ryan asked.

"I'm not expecting any problems, so I probably won't be more than half an hour."

Fidgeting, Jamie said, "I'll wait for you in my room, Mom." He ran ahead, through the side door into the building.

Leaning back in the seat, Ryan gave an affable nod. "I'll wait here. No use driving back home just to turn right around and come after you."

Fergie hesitated. "It's too hot and muggy out here, Ryan. Why not wait inside? At least the school is air conditioned."

To Ryan's astonishment, Julie burst out in a loud, high-pitched nervous voice, "No, no, don't come in, Ryan! You won't like it."

Fergie laughed. "Don't be silly, Julie. You don't want Ryan to die of heat out here, do you?"

Ryan climbed out of the jeep. Julie, close to tears, clung to her mother's hand as they marched inside the building. Over her head, Fergie and Ryan exchanged baffled glances. Fergie gave a helpless shrug.

They ambled into the classroom, which smelled of chalk dust, poster paint, and paste. Miss McIntyre, Julie's teacher, was

seated at her desk talking with a parent.

Fergie turned toward the display of drawings mounted on the far wall. "Look at all these lovely pictures."

Julie tossed her head. "Oh, you don't need to look at those. They're just pictures we drew in class today."

"But I want to see yours," Fergie insisted. She and Ryan threaded their way through the crowd and halted before the far wall, looking eagerly for Julie's picture.

As if on signal, Fergie and Ryan stopped short, staring. Every drawing was titled "My Family." They didn't need to look at the artist's signature to know which one was Julie's. Fergie gasped. Ryan stared at it stunned. Julie's picture showed her "family" seated around their newspaper-covered kitchen table, up to their elbows in crimson crabs. There was no doubt whatever about the identity of the husky male figure with the wide grin and the vibrant redwood-colored hair.

A pleasant, musical voice at Ryan's elbow said, "I'm Miss McIntyre, Julie's teacher. I'm so happy to meet Julie's father, at last. You've been gone quite a long time, haven't you?"

Fergie felt her face turn scarlet. At an earlier meeting she'd tried to tell Miss McIntyre about Julie's daddy, but other parents had been waiting, and the teacher had rushed on to the next in line. Now Ryan would tell her the facts.

"Uh, ah, yes." Ryan summoned a parental smile. "My job requires a great deal of travel—so I'm on the road a good bit of the time."

Fergie stifled a gasp. Miss McIntyre nodded, her expression one of understanding. "I'm glad you're home for a while. Children need a solid, reliable father"—she smiled at Ryan—"like you."

Fergie bit her tongue to keep from shouting, Wrong! He's a perennial bachelor, footloose and fancy-free.

Ryan gave Miss McIntyre his most engaging smile and said earnestly, "I'm delighted to be able to spend so much time with my, ah . . . with Julie."

Miss McIntyre gave them another teacherly smile. Then, glancing at the small crowd of waiting parents, she quickly remarked on what a bright child Julie was and how pleased she was with her progress.

Later, after visiting Jamie's teacher, they all piled back into Ryan's jeep. He glanced in the rearview mirror at Julie, who was perched on the edge of her seat, ominously quiet.

In hearty tones, he shouted over his shoulder, "That's a great picture you drew, Julie."

Swallowing a sob, Julie said remorsefully, "But I acted a lie—I let Miss McIntyre think you're my daddy."

"Well, we can't help it if she jumps to conclusions."

In a quavery voice Julie asked, "You don't mind—me drawing you with my family?"

Unaccountably, his heart lurched, for Julie's question pointed up the fact that he was an outsider. "No, Julie," he said after a long pause, "I don't mind. Don't worry about it anymore."

As soon as they got to Fergie's house, she told the children to hurry inside and get ready for bed.

When the sound of footsteps trooping upstairs died away, she crossed the veranda and perched on the railing. Ryan, leaning his shoulder against a pillar, was gazing out to sea.

Fergie's soft voice floated through the velvet darkness. "Ryan? Why the long, thoughtful pause when Julie asked if you minded her drawing you with her family?"

He turned his head to face her. "It was the way she said it. You with my family. It made me sound like an outcast."

"Well," said Fergie, not unkindly, "you

aren't family."

He gave her a wry grin. "I rather enjoyed being mistaken for Julie's father."

Fergie smiled. "I'm forever grateful to you for not giving Julie away." Softly, she added, "I owe you one."

A loving look came into his eyes. He turned to face Fergie and, placing his powerful hands gently on her shoulders, bent his head to hers and kissed her firmly on the lips, a long, lingering kiss.

At first she responded eagerly, reveling in his caress. But soon it bore in on Fergie what was happening. Abruptly, she pulled away from Ryan and took a deep breath to regain her composure.

Ryan stared at her with an injured air. "What gives?"

"Ryan, you know where this—this loving can lead. We made a pact, remember? Our friendship will be platonic. We're friends and neighbors, but nothing more."

"Right. We'll start tomorrow."

Relentlessly, she shook her head. "We'll start now."

He stared at her for a long moment and then let out a sigh that sounded like a groan. The harder he tried to be cool, the more he wanted her.

Her bleak gaze met his head on. "I'm sorry, Ryan, but that's the way of it. A pact is a pact . . ."

Looking crestfallen, he sighed. Slowly, he crossed the veranda and, head bowed, trudged down the steps and disappeared into the darkness.

Later that night, Fergie lay in bed unable to sleep, tormented by thoughts of Ryan.

She let out a long, frustrated sigh. Pulling away from his warm, inviting arms and, worse, sending him away, had surely been the hardest thing she'd ever done. She probably shouldn't see him at all, she thought morosely. Somehow she must learn to deny herself, so that when he went away, she would be able to bear it. The

next time he called, she'd tell him she was busy, if only to prove to herself she wasn't hooked on Ryan O'Donnell.



By keeping busy from early morning till late at night, Fergie managed to stave off Ryan's pleas to see her for almost a week. By Saturday, however, she had begun to wonder just what she was proving, for she missed him more than she would have thought possible.

That evening, when she came back from her errands in town, Jennifer informed her that Ryan had called and made an appointment for seven o'clock to lease some plants for his cottage.

Fergie groaned and shook her head hopelessly.

Promptly at seven, Ryan pounded vigorously on Fergie's front door.

Fergie received him coolly. "Why don't you have a seat, so we can discuss your layout—what will do best and look best in each room," she told him.

Smiling, Ryan reached and grabbed her hand. "I'll show you my layout instead."

"Ryan, hold on!"

"I am holding on." He took her firmly by the elbow and, ignoring her protests, led her out the door, across the veranda, and down the steps.

"Ryan, it's almost dark. We won't even be able to see the plants. Besides, it's clouding over. We won't see a thing . . ."

He smiled down at her. "I'll turn on all my lights," he said.

She sighed inwardly. Firmly, she reminded herself that this was a business meeting. Sooner or later she'd have to look over his cottage to see what plants he needed. It would be best to get it over with now.

She nodded. "You're on." She slid from under his encircling arm and began walking briskly across the lawn toward the cottage, Ryan striding at her side. The air was unnaturally still. Not a leaf stirred.

Dark clouds rolled in from the sea, obscuring the rising moon.

Ryan unlocked the door of his cottage and led her inside. He turned on the lights and silently he showed her around. Afterwards, Fergie stood in the living room and started telling him what plants she thought he should lease. She was interrupted by a burst of rain which came down in a sudden torrent, pelting the windows.

Fergie started toward the door. "Ryan, I really should head back home and make sure the windows are closed."

Ryan peered through the blinds. "I can see the kids, slamming down windows, like closing time at the post office, so you don't need to rush off."

Just then, there came a loud clap of thunder, and the lights in the cottage flickered and died.

"Besides," he continued, "you'll catch your death of cold . . . flu . . . pneumonia. Now, you just hold on. I'll build a fire. It'll give us light and take the chill off the place as well."

She hesitated, hating to go out. Within minutes, he had stacked a small pyramid of cones and logs on the hearth. He flicked on the gas jet and lighted it. A bright flame licked around the pinecones, shedding a soft, golden light. He smiled down at the fire burning as brightly and as hotly as the fire in his heart.

Nervously, Fergie went to the window and peered through the blinds. "I'd better see how the kids are doing," she muttered.

"Why not phone and check on them?" he suggested.

She went to the phone and dialed. Jennifer answered.

Ryan folded his arms across his chest and stood watching her face, unabashedly listening.

"Hum, um-hum, I see," Fergie said. And finally, "Bye, now."

"All okay?" Ryan asked.

Fergie nodded. "They're worried that

I'll drown if I try to come home. They want me to stay here awhile."

Ryan gave an affable nod, then wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close against his chest. "My darling little Greenthumbs, you must definitely stay till the storm's over."

His lips nuzzled her ear. He kissed her temple, the tip of her nose. Weary of battling her emotions, she lost the will to resist. Her eager lips sought his.

He paused before his recliner and smiled into her eyes. "Fergie, darling, this is bigger than both of us. Sit here beside me and watch the fire."

Together they sank down onto his favorite chair. Slowly, he leaned back, easing the recliner downward, carrying Fergie with him. He held her tightly in his arms, almost crushing her against his chest.

In low, husky tones, he said, "Many a night I have dreamed of lying with a woman, loving her. But the reality of lying here with you in my arms is beyond all of my wildest dreaming."

Softly, she said, "Ryan, I've never felt so special, so adored."

"That's because you are adored, darling, you are!"

He kissed her again and again. A lovely languor stole over her. As his kisses grew more passionate, she felt her own ardor rising to meet his. The warmth of her body mingled with his. Slowly, he unbuttoned her blouse and, without conscious thought, she found the buttons on his shirt and slipped them free. Yellow jacket and striped shirt, soft green blouse, fawn-colored slacks, flowered skirt, and underthings all drifted silently onto the thick beige carpet.

Again his lips claimed hers and, as if driven by an unquenchable desire, he began kissing her everywhere.

She felt lost to the world, as though she were floating on the sea, adrift on an un-

dulating wave of desire.

The firelight flickered crimson and gold, casting highlights and shadows on the ivory sheen of their bodies gleaming with the heat of their ardor as they moved in a slow, sensuous rhythm, faster and faster until their desire erupted in a blaze of fulfillment. An ecstatic cry burst from Fergie's lips as all the fantasies she had ever envisioned paled beside the joy of their union.

Never had Ryan felt so elated, so complete. Inexplicably, he was struck by an extraordinary thought: He had come home.

Unaware of time passing, they lay entwined in each other's arms. At length Fergie stirred, as a swimmer slowly rises to the surface through waves of euphoria. Suddenly, the enormity of what had gone between them swept through her, and she knew what she must do. She turned to Ryan, and holding his face between her palms, she said quietly, "Ryan, it isn't working, our pact. We have to stop seeing each other."

His fine dark eyes widened in disbelief. "You're being ridiculous. We haven't seen each other for a week. How do we know whether it's working?"

"Look what just happened."

Harshly, he said, "You've been deliberately avoiding me, haven't you?"

"Yes, there's no point in going on."

He was silent for a long moment. When at last he spoke, his voice was filled with longing and something else she couldn't define. "Are you sure that's the way you want it?"

"Yes," she said softly. "The storm is over, Ryan. It's time for me to go."

He made no reply. His heart pounded in his throat. For though her lips said yes, her eyes said no.

Remorselessly she rose to her feet. In the red glow of the embers dying on the hearth, she donned her clothes and with-

out another word went out, closing the door softly behind her.



The next morning Fergie awoke with a start, jerked into wakefulness by the feeling that something was terribly wrong. Disturbing thoughts of Ryan and their tumultuous lovemaking whirled in her head, making her blush at the memory of her wanton behavior.

She slid out of bed, flung on a white cotton T-shirt and shorts and stamped into the hall, rapping on the kids' doors, calling, "Everybody on your feet. Pancakes and sausage coming up."

In the kitchen, she yanked open the dishwasher, and noisily unloaded the machine.

Jennifer stumbled into the kitchen, yawning, rubbing sleep-glazed eyes. "What's all the commotion?"

Fergie eyed her purposefully. "I'm unloading all of my hostilities and aggressions."

Jennifer gazed at her questioningly.

"Actually," Fergie continued, "I'm sorting out my feelings."

Jennifer's brow wrinkled. "What kind of feelings? About us kids?"

"About Ryan O'Donnell."

Jennifer's quick, bright gaze shifted to Fergie. "Oh, Mama! Has he asked you to marry him? Has he?"

"Of course not," Fergie said sharply. "Ryan O'Donnell will never make a permanent commitment. The man enjoys being a bachelor."

"But, Mama," Jennifer persisted, "I think he really loves you."

"If he loves me, he's sure keeping it a secret from me. Anyway, I don't care all that much about him. I've decided not to see him anymore."

Julie and Jamie came into the room and sat down.

"Mommie, who aren't you going to see anymore?" Julie asked.

With an air of finality, Fergie said, "Mr. Ryan O'Donnell."

To her astonishment, all three children sat utterly still. They looked stunned, as though they'd been struck speechless by her announcement.

Jennifer, having already heard the news, was the first to recover her speech. "Mama, how can you say such a thing? You let Ryan become part of our family, and now you're kicking him out, for no reason at all."

Fergie set her jaw in a stubborn tilt. "I have my reasons."

When Julie, Jamie and Jennifer started protesting, she shot them a threatening look. "Quiet, all of you. My decision is final and I don't want to discuss it any further."

For the next two days, with careful planning, Fergie managed to avoid seeing Ryan. But nights were difficult, for her phantom lover invaded her dreams.

Then on Thursday, Ryan visited her at the greenhouse to tell her that he was leaving. Her heart thumped painfully at the news. She saw now that she couldn't stay angry with him. All her resolve melted away as soon as she saw his solemn face.

Ryan looked at her and sighed. "Ah, Greenthumbs, I am really going to miss you," he said.

Her heart aching, she turned and kept on working silently.

When he spoke again his low, resonant voice was soft and smooth as velvet against her cheek. "Fergie, you know how I feel about you, how very dear you are to me—so dear that I can hardly stand the thought of leaving you." He paused for a long moment, as if to control his emotions. "But now my work here is finished. It's time for me to move on."

For a long moment, she was silent. Finally, she said in choked tones, "You could stay on if you really wanted,

couldn't you?"

Gravely, Ryan nodded. "The company is putting pressure on me to run the loggerhead project and some other programs, but I'm a born transient, Fergie." His lips curved in a wry smile. "I have to move on."

A great wave of disappointment engulfed her. She felt as though she were drowning. How could he tell her how much she meant to him and then simply walk out of her life! Indignation drove out her disappointment.

"You may think you're a freedom-loving animal, Ryan O'Donnell, but the truth is, you're scared silly to risk making a commitment! Well, I'm glad you're leaving Pelican Island. And the sooner the better!"

Tears started in her eyes, and before Ryan could see them, she ran from the greenhouse to the house, went inside, and slammed the door behind her.

Fergie had just finished cleaning the crabs for the she-crab soup when she glanced over at Jennifer, who was working at the counter, and saw a single tear roll down her cheek and drip into the pie she was helping make for dinner.

Fergie crossed to her side and put an arm around her shoulders.

Jennifer sniffed. "I guess I just never thought Ryan would really go away, Mama."

Fergie swallowed hard, wrestling with her own feelings, trying to keep them under control. "That's the way life is, lovey. People go in and out of our lives . . . at least let's try our best to make his going-away dinner a festive occasion."

Fergie was trying to be brave about Ryan's departure. She had planned this Sunday going-away dinner as much for the children as for Ryan but it didn't seem to be working. Jamie and Julie set the table and then could find nothing to do but

walk around like zombies, as if waiting for the end of the world to come.

Pretending a lightness she did not feel, Fergie said, "For heaven's sake, gang, cheer up. You all look like gloom and doom instead of people giving a party."

Jennifer sighed. "We all feel terrible, Mama, because Ryan is leaving."

Promptly at one, Fergie heard Ryan pounding on the screen door and dashed down the hall to greet him. He stood smiling on the threshold, his left arm behind his back.

"I've come to see the lady of the house. Is your mother at home?"

Fergie laughed and felt her cheeks warming. "Ryan, you nut!"

His admiring gaze swept slowly down her slender figure. Then he expelled a long, appreciative "Oh-oo, oh-oo!" But surely such a young, gorgeous creature as yourself can't be the lady of the house . . .

"The same," Fergie said, laughing. "Step right this way."

His left arm, still folded behind his back, flashed forward, and with a flourish he handed her a magnificent bouquet of Golden Crown roses.

"Ryan!" Fergie exclaimed. "How lovely! Thank you." The next moment, Julie, Jamie, and Jennifer crowded around him, all talking at once.

They all moved to the parlor and sat down. Fergie tried not to think that this was the last day, these the last hours, and this the last meal she would ever share with the man she loved. An overpowering feeling of hopelessness swept through her, a despair she imagined was like that of a condemned man about to partake of his last meal before going to the guillotine.

The kids were clearly feeling equally depressed. They all perched on the edge of their seats, sitting stiffly erect and silent like mourners at a funeral. A pall of si-

lence pressed down around them.

Ryan's quirky brows rose in question. "Hey, what's gotten into everybody?" He looked at Jamie. Jamie looked back at him with a resigned expression on his face.

Ryan's gaze shifted to Julie. She looked up at him with wide, reproachful eyes, unspeaking.

He turned to Jennifer, seated across from him on the couch. She was regarding him with a gaze so soulful that he might have been setting off for permanent exile in Siberia. He quickly shifted his gaze to Fergie, who was seated beside her.

To his astonishment, Fergie's usually vibrant features were totally devoid of expression.

Just as he had begun to think the silence would smother them all, Jennifer asked the question that no one wanted to ask, but that was uppermost in all their minds.

"What time does your plane leave, Ryan?"

"Six-thirty—or thereabouts." His words were followed by another devastating silence.

Finally, Julie asked, "Are you still going to Washington?"

Ryan nodded slowly, then replied, "Washington, D.C., yes. And from there on to the Galapagos Islands, or perhaps England."

Jennifer tossed her head in an independent gesture. "If you can't come to see us, then we'll go to see you. I'd love to see England, wouldn't you, Mama?"

Fergie managed a tremulous smile. "Yes, of course. We'd all love to see England, someday. Come on, kids, let's get dinner on the table."

Minutes later, Jamie jangled a dinner bell summoning Ryan to the dining room. In the doorway, he stopped short, staring in astonishment. The table was set with a yellow cloth and a centerpiece of fresh flowers flanked by sparkling crystal candleabra. "This is fantastic! You really

went all out!" Ryan beamed.

After they were seated, Ryan's gaze flicked to Fergie. Her face was impassive, as if this were an ordinary Sunday family dinner. He kept searching her face for some sign of emotion. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

Fergie picked at her food, carefully avoiding Ryan's gaze. If he'd expected her to sit here looking tragic and bereft, he had another thing coming. She would not cry. Would not!

Fergie plainly didn't give a hoot that he was going out of her life forever, Ryan thought. For some reason he couldn't define, it was a damned unsettling thought. She could at least pretend she was sorry. Suddenly, he longed to get away. He made up his mind not to linger, but to leave immediately—after dessert.

Ryan praised Jennifer's pie lavishly, but as soon as everyone had finished the last bite, he pushed his chair back from the table and started to rise.

"Well, I'd better be moving on."

"Do you have to go so soon?" Jennifer waived.

"By the time I drive to the airport, turn in the jeep, and get my boarding pass, it'll be almost time for takeoff." He picked up his jacket and flung it over his arm. For a long moment, he stood perfectly still, his gaze on Fergie, waiting, hoping for a fond, friendly good-bye, hoping she'd at least wish him well.

She rose from her chair. Her chest was tight, and her throat ached with unshed tears, so that she could scarcely speak. In hoarse tones, she said, "I'll see you to the door."

Ryan turned and strode through the hallway, with everyone trooping after him. At the doorway, he suddenly turned to face Fergie. She was looking up at him with wide, shiny eyes. Her lower lip quivered. He wanted to take her in his arms, kiss her full, tempting mouth with all the

passion seething inside him, as if to imprint his mark on her lips forever. Instead, he reached out and touched her face, letting his fingertips trace—memorize—the delicate curve of her cheek.

It was all she could do not to fling her arms about his neck and kiss him good-bye. But it was better—no, safer—this way.

He kissed both Jennifer and Julie on the cheek, ruffled Jamie's hair, then gave him a manly clap on the shoulder.

"Jamie, you take care of all the girls, you hear? Good-bye, kids." His lips curved in a broad, melting smile. With a mock salute, he turned, strode across the veranda, leaped down the steps, and was gone.

Fergie's vision blurred. She turned her head away. All she could see was the shape of the deserted, weathered gray cottage looming up next door. Suddenly, she could not stand to look at Ryan's empty cottage. Her heart seemed to shatter. With the back of her hand, she brushed away the mist stinging her eyes and ran inside.

Ryan pressed his foot hard on the accelerator, burning down the white sand road, eager to make his escape from swirling emotions that had grown too strong to handle.

A small, nostalgic sigh escaped him as he thought about the way people drifted in and out of his life. But what did he expect? he asked himself. Good Lord, he had packed up his belongings and said good-bye countless times before, and he'd always felt a little tug of regret at leaving. And, he reminded himself sharply, he'd always gotten over it. Besides, he'd taken hundreds of pictures, so he could see Fergie and the kids any time he wanted to. Just for a second, a terrible feeling of loneliness engulfed him. But then, it was only natural that he would miss them after being around them so much.

Clenching his jaw, he floored the gas pedal.

Fergie retreated to the greenhouse after she had cleaned up the party dishes. Strangely, her eyes stung, and her nose kept running. It was the chemicals, she told herself. Must be . . . but why lie to herself? Ryan was gone and she was shattered, bereft.

Each time a car rolled down the sandy road, or a jeep rattled past, like now, she strained her ears, listening, waiting. She was so used to listening for Ryan's jeep—a habit she must break.

Without warning, a shadow fell across the doorway, blocking the light. Startled, she looked up and saw a tall, muscular figure silhouetted against the bright afternoon sunlight. Suddenly her vision blurred. Her mind was playing tricks on her. She was imagining things.

"Excuse me, ma'am," the stranger said, "but I wonder if I could borrow a small child? You see, I'm locked out of my cottage next door—"

"Ryan!" she shouted. She spun away from her worktable and flew to the door. Before she could say another word, he folded her in his arms and kissed her again and again, with wild, hungry kisses that left her weak and breathless.

Finally, she managed to gasp, "You've rented the cottage for another month!"

"Nope. Guess again."

"You forgot something and came back to pick it up?"

He gave her a little squeeze. "Nope, but you're getting warm."

"Beats me."

He bent his head to hers, his lips nuzzling her ear. "I forgot to ask you a very important question: How would you feel about a name change?"

She leaned back, gazing at him in pretended puzzlement. "You're changing your name?"

He shook his head, rubbing noses. "No, Greenthumbs. I'm changing your name from Eileen Fergus Duffy to Eileen Fergus Duffy O'Donnell."

Suddenly, there came a burst of loud, enthusiastic barking. Fergie and Ryan swung about just as Julie, Jamie, Jennifer, and Dylan ran through the doorway grinning broadly.

Wide-eyed, Julie asked, "Did you forget to kiss Mama good-bye?"

Ryan nodded. "I forgot to kiss your mother, and I forgot a couple of other things, too." He turned to look into Fergie's eyes. "Crossing that damn causeway was like cutting my own lifeline—like being cut adrift. I just couldn't bear the thought of leaving. I couldn't do it! Then I finally figured out that everybody needs somebody to dote on." His voice turned low and husky. "I need you, Fergie—I need you and your three kids to dote on. I need you all to love."

A funny look came over his face, and sounding faintly surprised, he went on. "That's why I was a rolling stone. I just kept rolling around and around, looking for somebody to love. And now I found this crazy plant lady. I'm madly in love with her, and I don't want to live without her. So, I thought, if she'd have me, I'd just marry her along with her three neat kids and her big black dog."

Fergie eyed him skeptically. "Sounds great the way you tell it, Ryan, but what will happen when they all start to drive you crazy?"

"Why, their mother and I will just slip out on the veranda, turn up the music, and dance the night away under that old Carolina moon. Now stop frowning and say yes, Fergie."

"Say yes, Mom!" the kids yelled.

Fergie smiled, seeing she was outvoted. "Okay, yes, Ryan. Yes!" ♥

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E. Total Distribution (Sum of C and D)	307,696	354,391
F. Copies Not Distributed 1. Office Use, Left-Over, Unaccounted, Spoiled After Printing	2,932	8,854
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G. Total (sum of E & F— should equal net press run shown in A)	342,125	380,200

11. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete:

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